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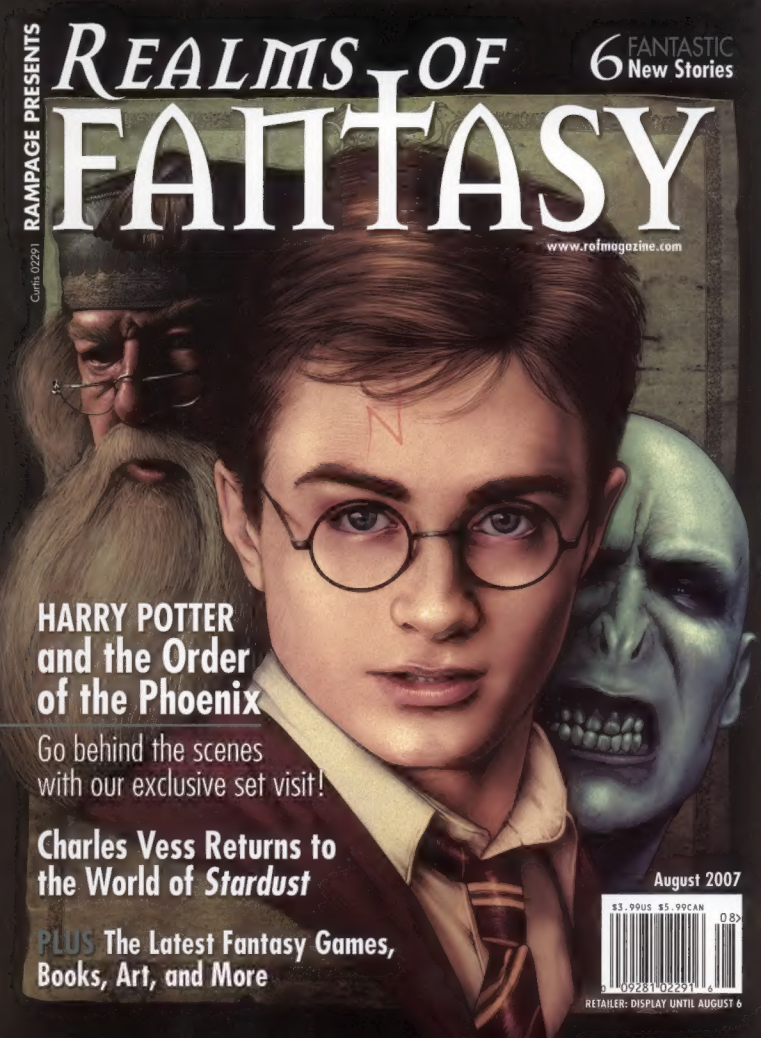

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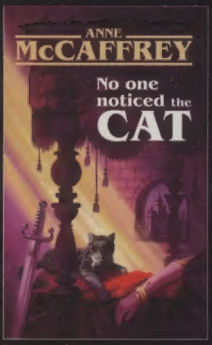

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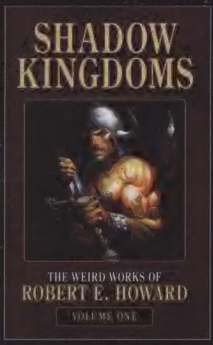

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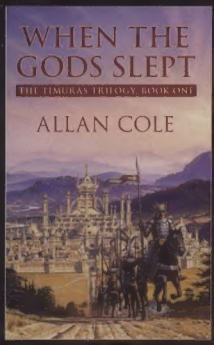

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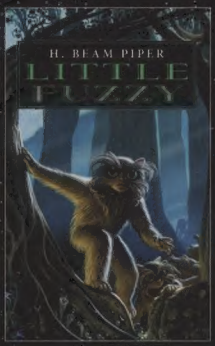

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CHRISTOPHER BARZAK grew up in Ohio, has lived in California and Michigan,and is now a resident of Japan, teaching English near Tokyo. His stories have appeared in *Nerve*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Trampoline*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*. His first novel, *One for Sorrow*, will be published in August 2007. He is currently working on a second novel set in Japan.

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ARI BERK is a folklorist, poet, and scholar of literature, iconography, and comparative myth. Professor of English at Central Michigan University, he is a frequent contributor to both *Realms of Fantasy* magazine's Folkroots and Gallery sections, and the Endicott Studio Online Journal of Mythic Arts (www.endicott-studio.com). He is the author of the books *The Runes of Elfland, Goblins*! and *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Letters*, all illustrated by Brian Froud. His latest book, *Coyote Speaks—Wonders of the Native American World*, is forthcoming from Abrams Books. He lives in Michigan with his wife and son and has passed three times through a holed stone.

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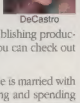
CHRIS COCOZZA, an award-winning book cover artist, has illustrated over 500 book covers for major publishers across the United States and abroad. From romance novels to children's books, his portfolio demonstrates a wide range of "looks," photographic to impressionistic, all exquisitely depicting the the concept you have in mind. Chris was invited in 1995 to be a member of The Society of Illustrator's, in New York City.


DeCastro

ANNIKA DECASTRO was born and raised in Heber City, Utah. She is 20 years old and has loved drawing since she learned to hold a pencil. She is working toward her BFA degree at Southern Utah University in the Illustration program. Annika has big plans for her art career and looks forward to one day writing and illustrating many children's books and short stories.

ELIZABETH M. GLOVER is serving the thirteenth year of a life sentence as a publishing production evil overlord. If you want to read her nattering about fonts and PDF files, you can check out her blog at www.barbarienne.livejournal.com.

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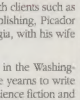
Harmon

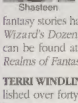
WAY JENG is a graduate of the Clarion workshop. He was born in California and currently lives in Illinois. He began life looking to write philosophy, moved on to writing a column about Japanese cartoons (anime), and writes fiction whenever possible.


Munk

CAMERON MUNK is a graduate of Southern Utah University and was born and raised in a rural town in Utah. He has enjoyed drawing from a very young age.

TIM PRATT's new collection, *Hart & Boot & Other Stories*, was published in early 2007, and his next novel, *Blood Engines*, will appear in October 2007.

TONY SHASTEEN has been an illustrator since 1995. His work has been seen in publications such as *Communication Arts* and *Spectrum*. He has partnered with clients such as Coca-Cola, BellSouth, IBM, Siemens, Nascar, Ten Speed Publishing, Picador Publishing, and Image comics. He lives outside Atlanta, Georgia, with his wife and two legitimate sons.


Shasteen

ALAN SMALE grew up in Yorkshire, England, but now lives in the Washington, DC, area. A scientist by day and history buff by night, he yearns to write the Great American Time Travel Novel. In the meantime his science fiction and fantasy stories have appeared in around twenty anthologies and magazines including *Low Port, A Wizard's Dozen, A Nightmare's Dozen, Writers of the Future 13*, and *Paradox*. Full information can be found at *www.alansmale.com*. "A Trade in Serpents" marks Alan's third appearance in *Realms of Fantasy*; the quotes attributed to Ben Franklin are genuine.

TERRI WINDLING is a writer, editor, and painter currently living in Devon, England. She has published over forty books, winning seven World Fantasy Awards, the Mythopoeic Award, and the Bram Stoker Award. Her most recent publication is *The Coyote Road*, an anthology of Trickster fiction co-edited with Ellen Datlow. She is the director of The Endicott Studio for Mythic Arts. Visit Endicott on the web at: *www.endicott-studio.*

TODAY, I STARTED EARLY IN THE TRENCHES. AND FACED A PANZER **TANK** ABOUT TO CRUSH ME. I LOBBED A GRENADE JUST UNDER IT AND HIT THE DIRT. WHEN I LOOKED UP, I FOUND MYSELF INCHES AWAY FROM AN **ELF QUEEN**. SHE SMILED, AND THEN TRIED TO TAKE MY HEAD OFF WITH A SWORD. SPINNING AROUND, I FOUND MYSELF TEAMED UP WITH THE WORLD'S GREATEST **SUPERHEROES**. FENDING OFF AN ATTACK. TAKING COVER BEHIND A WALL. I SOON REALIZED I WAS LOST IN A GIANT **DUNGEON**. GETTING OUT WOULD TAKE SOME DOING.

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By Resa Nelson

Realms of Fantasy visits the set of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.*

Everyone knows how Harry Potter slips from the mundane world of ordinary people (aka "Muggles") into the magical world of wizards and witches: he makes his way to King's Cross railway station in London, presses against the barrier between Platform 9 and Platform 10, and stumbles into the hidden world that exists alongside ours, where the Hogwarts Express waits at Platform 9¾.

Getting to the real-life location where the Harry Potter movies are filmed is just as magical. First, you drive about an hour out of London. At some point you leave the highway and end up on a winding road that cuts a narrow path through a thick forest. You half expect the Whomping Willow to bash its branches down on your car at any moment. But then the lush foliage parts unexpectedly, and you're there. You would think the Harry Potter movies would be shot at Pinewood Studios. It's the most famous movie studio in England and where movies ranging from all the James Bond movies to *The Da Vinci Code* have been made. Instead, the Harry Potter franchise has found its own unique space at a remote and little-known former airport. The vast interior space is divided into long concrete avenues, and many of the folks on set get around by riding bicycles.

ABOVE: Imelda Staunton (left) takes the role of Dolores Umbridge, the new Dark Arts teacher. TOP: Harry and Cho get closer. RIGHT: The Dursleys are still clueless about Harry Potter.

It's impossible not to think of them on broomsticks instead of bicycles—especially when two men stroll by carrying an Auror's broom.

The indoor avenues are lined with artifacts from the previous movies, a bit reminiscent of the warehouse at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark.* Hanging from the high ceiling are six versions of the Weasley's flying car that Harry and Ron once piloted to Hogwarts when they missed the train. The cars are in various stages of ruin, and the worst of the lot has been nicknamed "Rambo." All props are kept on hand, because the filmmakers never know exactly what they might

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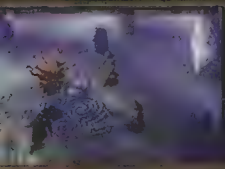

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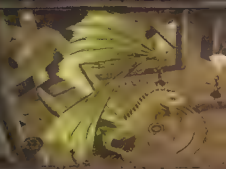

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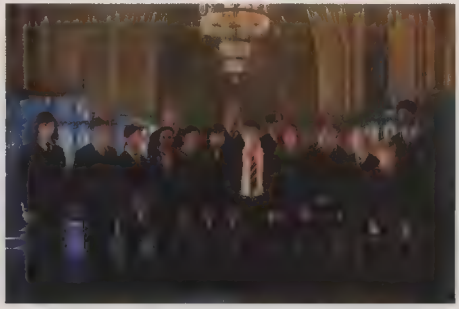

BELOW: Harry Potter forms his own class on the Dark Arts. LEFT TOP: Dolores Umbridge takes tea. LEFT BOTTOM: Out of 5,000 actresses, talented Evanna Lynch won the part of Luna Lovegood.

need to use in future movies because no one knows what J.K. Rowling will write next.

It's a busy day on set. Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson, and Rupert Grint are all on hand to shoot a scene in which Sirius Black (Gary Oldman) shows up to touch base with Harry (Radcliffe) and his friends Hermione (Watson) and Ron (Grint) by popping his head up through a fire in the Gryffindor common room at Hogwarts.

Like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, each Harry Potter movie set is a study in detail. The furniture looks old and musty—it's been aged with razor blades. Real books line the shelves. A bulletin board is crammed with flyers and notices about wizard chess practice, a lost book, the Bugs and Slugs Club, Quidditch practice, and a special sale of cauldron cakes. But the portraits in the Gryffindor common room aren't of witches and warlocks—they're paintings of crew members made up to look like Hogwarts alumni.

Welcome to the world of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the filming of the fifth book in J.K. Rowling's series about the boy wizard, due in theaters on July 13 from Warner Bros. Pictures. Director David Yates

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Catch the last 20 minutes of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* on IMAX 3-D! You'll see Hermione, and Ron in larger-than-life format. Both IMAX and conventional versions of the film open on July 13. Why not see both of them?

(TV's *The Girl in the Cafe*) is a newcomer to both the fantasy genre and the Harry Potter phenomenon. "I was doing a bit of music [for a movie] with a big orchestra," Yates says. "And every time, between recording sessions when the musicians were having their tea, they were all getting this book out. And I thought, what's going on? Half this orchestra is reading Harry Potter — that's bizarre. Who's Harry Potter?

"I came late to this great, fantastical world but fell in love with it very quickly. In terms of Western filmmaking, there are few opportunities to explore very real, emotional issues like growing up and rebelling, which is at the heart of this story in a magical, expressionistic way. And that's what's great about Harry Potter. We're dealing with things that everyone that's ever grown up will relate to about suddenly realizing that the grownups can let you down. Suddenly realizing that the grownups can be abusive. Suddenly realizing that sometimes you can lose your way a little bit. Those are very real things happening in every suburb, in every city, in every country in the world, but we're expressing them in this magical universe."

The kids take a break from shooting to talk about what fans can expect in the latest installment. "With every film, they are getting darker and scarier — this isn't any exception," Radcliffe says. "In the fourth film the darkness came out of a quite heightened reality of the fantasy. David's set it very much in realism, as much as it can be in this world, of course. He's very keen to make it the mental journey of Harry, which I think is why this film is going to appeal to older people, because they've been through this crazy, slightly hormonal, slightly paranoid and self conscious stuff that Harry's going through in this film."

Watson adds, "This script has much more to do with politics and the world outside. It's much more about Harry's emotional journey and all the demons he has to fight within him-

Holly Hunter Has a Date with an Angel on TNT's *Saving Grace*

For the first time, Oscar and Emmy winner Holly Hunter (*The Piano*, *Thirteen*) stars in her own TV series called *Saving Grace*, premiering in July on TNT. Hunter plays Grace, a bad girl who's paving

her own road to hell by sleeping with her married co-worker, drinking, and swearing so frequently she no longer notices. When a rich and powerful cattleman crosses the line from flirtation to harassment, she doesn't hesitate to punch his lights out. When she gets in trouble with her superiors, her flippancy gets her into even deeper trouble.

Maybe it's because Grace is a police detective and she's weary of seeing the worst side of humanity. To her credit, she's a good aunt who genuinely enjoys the company of children. But one night her world falls apart when she drives drunk and kills a pedestrian. Kneeling beside the dead man in the middle of the road, Grace hits rock bottom and prays for help. Out of the dark pops Earl (Leon Rippy of TV's *Deadwood*), a man who looks like he'd feel at home sitting next to her in a bar. Instead, Earl announces he's the answer to her prayer — and he spreads his wings to prove it. Grace learns that she's the only one who can see Earl, and he's an honest-to-God angel. Earl tells her she's running out of time. If she doesn't clean up her act soon, she'll be locked out of the pearly gates forever.

About Hunter, creator Nancy Miller says, "Holly can break your heart and make you laugh in the same moment. She's astonishing. Grace is a complex character, deeply troubled but searching for the good, with a heart full of love and pain, and a surprising tenderness when you least expect it."

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self. There's still lots going on, but it's more focused on human qualities and characters' attitudes as the book—which was about Harry getting through the tasks. This one is about the difficulties of being human."

The story begins, as always, during Harry's summer break before he begins his fifth year at Hogwarts. One night he runs into his cousin Dudley, who's coming home after harassing a wizard family. Soon Harry and Dudley are attacked by Dementors, the spectre-like prison guards of Azkaban. Keeping his wits about him, Harry fights them off with magic. He's soon called to appear in a hearing before a panel of judges at the Ministry of Magic for the use of underage magic in the presence of Muggles.

Even though Harry's cleared of any wrongdoing, he runs into more problems when the school year begins. The last time he saw his classmates was after the Triwizard Tournament, in which fellow student Cedric was killed by Lord Voldemort. It was also the time Voldemort returned to power. Fast forward to the present, and Harry is reading the summer editions of *The Quibbler* newspaper, which accuses Harry of lying about Voldemort's return. Harry feels isolated, especially because Dumbledore appears to be avoiding him.

Harry learns the Ministry of Magic wrongly believes Dumbledore is gaining an army against them. One of the judges at Harry's hearing, Dolores Umbridge (played by

Is Professor Snape Good or Bad?

One of Rowling's most interesting characters is Professor Snape. Sometimes Snape seems steeped with hatred toward Harry. And yet, he's also helped Harry. What do the experts think about Snape?

"I don't know," Radcliffe says. "I thought he was categorically bad. I read an interview with J.K. Rowling and one of the questions was, 'Is Snape good or bad?' It was just after the 4th book came out, and she said, 'Well, you've read the book, so you can decide.' And I thought, 'Well, that means he's bad.' Then I thought 'No wait—that's so ambiguous. I've just been fooled by her. I think he could be actually good. I have no idea, but I think there's definitely a very very strong connection between him and one of Harry's parents. Stronger than you think. That has to be—it has to be something really deep-rooted for Snape's hatred of Harry."

But Watson isn't so sure. She chooses to side with Dumbledore. "You know *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch? His only failure within the novel is he's too trusting. I think there's a parallel between him and Dumbledore. I think Dumbledore's weakness is that he believes in people, which is not a weakness but when you're in a war with someone, then to trust someone can be a weakness. He gave [Snape] the benefit of the doubt and in the end [Dumbledore] died."

Producer David Barron says "I'd like to think that Snape was good, but we're not privy to any inside information, so careful even with David [Yates, the director] to keep the secrets intact because in a relaxed moment one might give

Illustration by Edgar Garcia, www.no-pic-available.com

something away that one shouldn't. So she's very careful and doesn't give us the opportunity. I'd like to think that Snape was good because it would be a satisfying journey for the character. We really love to hate him throughout, and it would be nice to love to love him."

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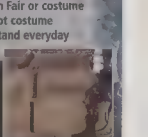

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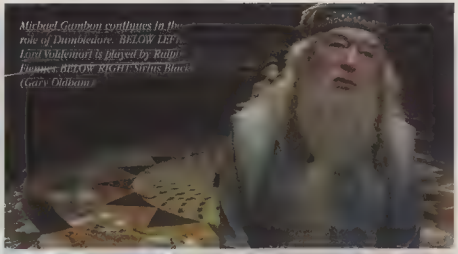

Michael Gambon continues in the role of Dumbledore. BELOW LEFT: Lord Voldemort is played by Ralph Fiennes. BELOW RIGHT: Sirius Black (Gary Oldman)

Imelda Staunton of *Vera Drake*)—becomes the new Defense Against Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts. Before long, the Ministry awards her the title of "High Inquisitor" of Hogwarts, giving her power over her fellow teachers. When Umbridge's watered down lessons leave her students feeling cheated, they take matters into their own hands. Forming their own secret society, Harry teaches his peers the magic he's used over the years to defeat Lord Voldemort and others.

In every book, there tends to be some profound, philosophical statement from J.K. Rowling, whether it's through Dumbledore or Hermione or someone else," Watson says. Each time they learn a different thing. The lesson that Harry learns is that he doesn't have to be alone and that it's OK to surround himself with friends. Hermione talks particularly about stopping himself from isolating himself. He really wants to go it alone. He really just wants to separate himself from the things that matter to him and the things he cares about so that he doesn't feel like he has to lose as much. I think the lesson that he learns through the story is to accept the help and the love and the trust from Hermione and Ron, which I think is a really important message. Trust your friends. Be a loyal friend. And let them help you.

Yates is quick to point out that one of his joys is watching the growth of Radcliffe, Watson, and Grint as actors. "Harry, in this story, has a very complex, difficult journey emotionally. He has these terrible feelings of anger. He feels at one point he's almost going mad from within. He wonders if it's Voldemort that's starting to influence him. So Dan's got quite an intense acting arc, and week by week he surprises me—some of the things he's reaching are quite terrific.

About his work in this movie, Radcliffe says, "Hopefully, I'm getting better. Each director brings his own style, so that's something new to adapt to. I've never felt so pushed and so exhilarated. Out of all the films so far, this has been my favorite to do. It's about getting those little nuances into the performance. Because it's very easy, when you're 11, to give a very general performance of the character. You're sort of guessing your way through everything. But at this stage you've really got to concentrate on getting the details and the nuances into the character and remain real and unaffected."

While Radcliffe has the advantage of having played the same character for several years, newcomer Evanna Lynch literally came on board as an unknown from Ireland to play Luna Lovegood (the daughter of the editor of *The Quibbler*—the newspaper so critical of Harry), who becomes his unexpected ally. And it was nearly impossible to find Lynch.

"She's such a specific character in the book," says producer David Barron, who is involved in five of the seven Harry Potter movies. "She has a slightly detached otherworldliness about her. She's slightly eccentric. She's a bit of a loner. You could feel sorry for her but you don't, because she doesn't need you to. It was really quite a difficult casting call that one."

The casting director contacted schools in search of a 14- to 16-year old girl to play Luna. After 5,000 girls were screened, the filmmakers still hadn't found the right one. In a last-

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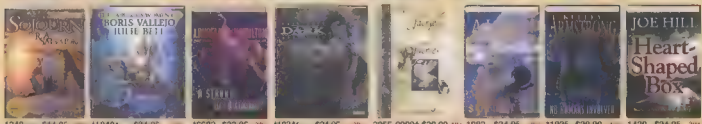

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ditch effort, they organized a casting call in central London that was publicized on radio and in the press.

When we cast the character Cho Chang, we had a casting call and what we thought was a shockingly large number of 3,000 people turn up," Barron says. "This time 'round 15,000 girls turned up. Everyone was individually met and spoken to. About 400 were put on tape and it came down to 29 to put on DVD for David and I to look at.

Barron asked the casting director her opinion before viewing the auditions. She told him that one girl had potential. When Barron saw the ninth audition, he stopped the DVD, knowing he'd found Luna at last. "She just has all those qualities," Barron says. "She's Luna Lovegood. We all felt the same. It was marvelous. She came over and did a very short test because she'd never been in a film before. We love her."

Lynch is one of those rare acting finds because she had no previous acting experience at all. She's just a girl who came to the casting call.

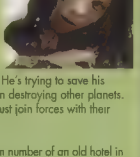
"She's a Harry Potter fanatic," Barron says. She loves the part of Luna Lovegood—she felt she was born to play Luna—and sure enough, that's what she's doing.

But what about Harry? Because the final novel won't be published until July 21, there's still plenty of time to speculate about the rumors that Rowling's much loved character will die.

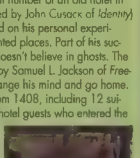
"I think it's probably the only way J.K. Rowling would ever be able to finish," Radcliffe says. "Otherwise, she'd always be bringing him back to life. There's all this to-do about it, but as long as the ending makes sense and is satisfying, I don't think fans will care what happens, as long as it does justice to what the rest of the six books have done. My theory is that Harry will die, because there's this whole connection with Harry and Voldemort. The only way that Voldemort can die is if Harry dies as well."

Even though the book series will end soon, there are still two movies yet to be made. *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* starts filming in September.

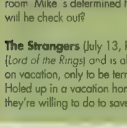
Movies to Watch for This Summer



Hostel: Part 2 (due in theaters on June 8 from Lionsgate) is a sequel in which director/writer Eli Roth (*Hostel, Cabin Fever*) explores the origin of his horror tale. *Hostel: Part 2* is about three American girls studying art in Rome. When they take a weekend trip, they cross paths with a model they know from one of their courses. The model invites them to join her, and they unwittingly head for a destination where danger awaits.



Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer (June 15, 20th Century Fox) is a sequel to the 2005 film that grossed over $330 million worldwide. Mr. Fantastic (played by Ioan Gruffudd) and the Invisible Woman (Jessica Alba) are making wedding plans, but they're interrupted by worldwide reports of the Silver Surfer, who has the ability to manipulate the energies of the universe. He's trying to save his own world, but doing so results in destroying other planets. To stop him, the Fantastic Four must join forces with their nemesis—Victor Von Doom.



1408 (July 13, MGM) is the room number of an old hotel in New York City. Mike Enslin (played by John Cusack of *Identity*) has written successful books based on his personal experiences of staying overnight in haunted places. Part of his success comes from the fact that he doesn't believe in ghosts. The hotel manager, Mr. Olin (played by Samuel L. Jackson of *Freedomland*) pleads with Mike to change his mind and go home. Bad things have happened in Room 1408, including 12 suicides and the deaths of 30 other hotel guests who entered the room. Mike is determined to check in to Room 1408—but will he check out?

The Strangers (July 13, Rogue Pictures) stars Liv Tyler (*Lord of the Rings*) and is about a young couple who set out on vacation, only to be terrorized by three masked men. Holed up in a vacation home, the couple must decide what they're willing to do to save themselves.

Courtesy of Rogue Pictures/photo by Glenn Watson

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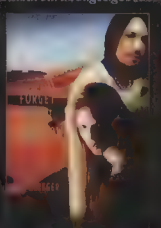

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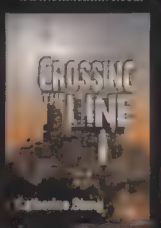

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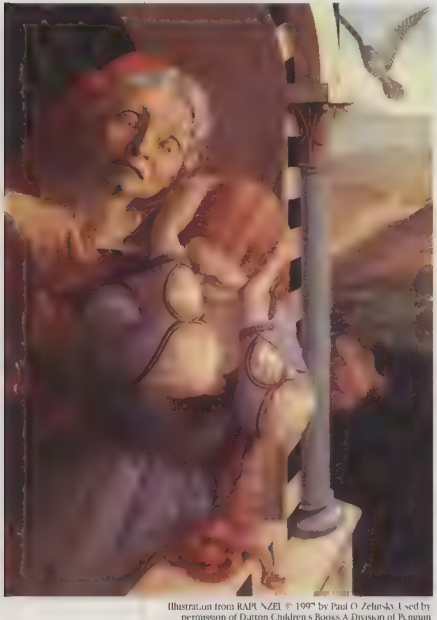
By Terri Windling

The themes in stories about Rapunzel are universal and timeless.

When the sorceress discovers that Rapunzel is pregnant, she cuts off the girl's hair and banishes her to the wilderness.

Maiden Locked in a Tower stories can be found in folk traditions around the world—but "Rapunzel," the best known of these stories, comes from literary sources. The version of "Rapunzel" we know today was published as a German folk tale by the Brothers Grimm in 1857—but it's now believed that their "Rapunzel" was neither German nor a proper folk tale. Scholars have shown that a number of the storytellers from whom the Brothers Grimm obtained their material were recounting "authored" tales from German, French, and Italian literary sources rather than anonymous folk stories passed orally from teller to teller. The Grimms' "Rapunzel," for example, was derived from a story of the same name published by Friedrich Schultz in 1790—which was a loose translation of an earlier French story called "Persinette" by Charlotte-Rose de la Force, published in 1698 at the height of the "adult fairy tale" literary movement in Paris. La Force's tale was influenced by an even earlier Italian story, "Petrosinella" by Giambattista Basile, published in 1634 in his story collection *Lo cunto de li cunti* (also called the *Pentamarone*). Each writer in this chain used folk motifs drawn from the oral tradition (associated with peasants and the countryside), but reworked them into literary tales for adult readers presumed to be educated, urban, and upper class. It is difficult, however, to draw a sharp line between folk tales and literary fairy tales, placing "Rapunzel" in one category or another—for in the centuries since Basile and De Force's original publications, "Rapunzel" has slipped into the oral tradition of storytellers throughout the West, where it's now part of our folk culture even though it didn't start there.



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Let's go back to the start, however, with Giambattista Basile's "Petrosinella." Basile, born near Naples, drew plots and characters from the folk tales of the region, reworking them into courtly tales for the Italian aristocracy. What follows is a bare-bones summary of story, without the clever turns of language that makes Basile's work so sprightly and distinctive. (I suggest reading Basile's story in full in a good English translation—such as the one provided by Jack Zipes in his book *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*.)

Once upon a time, the tale begins, a woman looked out her window at the garden of her neighbor, an ogress, and developed a terrible hunger for the fine parsley growing there. Now, this woman was pregnant, and it was widely believed that denying the cravings of a pregnant woman could cause grave harm to mother and child—so

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she snuck into her neighbor's garden, not once, but over and over. The ogress laid a trap and caught her. "What do you have to say for yourself, thief?"

The woman threw herself on her neighbor's mercy, but the ogress was not appeased. "I will spare your life only if you give me the child you carry, be it boy or girl." The frightened woman agreed and slunk back home, pockets full of parsley.

She soon gave birth to a beautiful baby girl and named her Petrosinella (derived from the word for parsley in the Neapolitan dialect). By the time the child was seven years old, her mother had forgotten all about her promise. But when Petrosinella started school, her path took her by the ogress's house.

Each time Petrosinella passed, the old ogress called out to her, "Tell your mother to remember the promise she made to me, Petrosinella!" The child did as she was told. Her mother grew more and more frightened, until one day she cried out, "Tell that woman my answer is 'Take her!'"

When Petrosinella delivered this message, the ogress grabbed her by the hair, carried her deep into the forest, and locked her in a tall stone tower. The tower had no door or stairs, just a small window at the very top, and there the child would sit, straining to catch a small ray of sun. The girl grew up in this lonely place. The ogress was her only company, climbing in and out of the tower on the long, gold braids of Petrosinella's hair.

Years passed, and Petrosinella grew into a beautiful young woman, her golden braids so long they coiled on the ground below. It happened that a prince, who was hunting nearby, became separated from his fellows. He stumbled through the forest, lost, and came upon the tower. The ogress was away and Petrosinella sat in the window sunning her hair. She was the most beautiful young woman the prince had ever seen, and he instantly fell in love. He called up to Petrosinella, and for several days they conversed and sighed and pledge their love. Then Petrosinella proposed a plan to meet when the moon had risen. That night she gave the old ogress a dose of poppy to make her sleep, then she threw her braids over the windowsill and pulled the young man up. The prince then "made a little meal out of the parsley sauce of love."

More nights of love-making followed until an old gossip got wind of this. She told the ogress what was going on, warning her that her "daughter" might up and fly if she didn't act quickly. The ogress was unperturbed, saying, "She won't be able to get very far without the use of my magic acorns, and I've carefully hidden them in a little spot above the rafters."

The prince observes Mother Gothel climbing Rapunzel's hair to enter the tower. The illustration is by Mercer Mayer from Favorite Tales from Grimm *(Four Winds Press, 1982)*

Petrosinella had been listening at the window, and she quickly made a plan. She told her lover to bring some rope, then she drugged the ogress to sleep again, stole the three acorns, and used the rope to leave the tower. They hadn't gone very far when the ogress woke and discovered girl's escape using her magic to catch up to the fleeing lovers in no time. Petrosinella threw down the first acorn. In turned into a ferocious dog—but the ogress drew bread from her pocket and fed the dog so it let her pass. Petrosinella threw down the second acorn. It turned into a raging lion. The ogress stole the skin from a grazing ass and charged into the lion, which reared back from this monstrous apparition and fled in fright. Petrosinella threw down the third acorn. It turned into a hungry wolf, which quickly gobbled up the ogress before she could use her magic again to save herself.

Now the lovers were safe. The traveled on to the prince's own kingdom, where "with the kind permission of his father, the prince made Petrosinella his wife and proved that, after many trials and tribulations, one hour in a safe harbor can make you forget one hundred years of storm."

Sixty years after Basile's "Petrosinella," the French writer Charlotte-Rose de La Force borrowed elements from it to use in her own Maiden-Locked-in-a-Tower story, "Persinette," published in her fairy tale collection *Les contes de contes* in 1697. (This, of course, was a practice much more common in the days before copyright laws; particularly among writers of fairy tales, where the practice continues to this day.) La Force was part of a group of writers (including Madame D'Aulnoy, Madame de Murat, and Charles Perrault) who created a vogue for adult fairy stories in the literary salons of Paris. Like Basile, La Force was writing for an educated, aristocratic audience, creating stories that were meant both to entertain and to comment on issues of contemporary life.

One issue of particular concern to women of the period was the common practice of arranged marriages, particularly among the upper classes. Women had no legal say in these arrangements, which were often conducted as business transactions between one aristocratic family and another. Daughters were used to cement alliances, to curry favor, and to settle debts. Sex was a husband's legal right, and there was no possibility of divorce. Young girls could find themselves married off to men many years their senior or of vile temper and habits; disobedient daughters could be shut away in convents or locked up in madhouses. Little wonder, then, that French fairy tales are filled with girls handed over to various wicked creatures by cruel or feckless parents, or locked up in enchanted towers where only true love can save them.

De Force and other writers of the period championed the idea of consensual, companionate marriages ruled by love and civility. (Some also believed that Fate intended certain souls to be together.) The emphasis on love and romance in their stories can seem quaint and saccharine today, but such stories were progressive, even subversive, in the context of the time. La Force herself was an independent minded woman from a noble family who caused several scandals in her quest to live a life that was self-determined. She fell in love and attempted to marry a young man without parental permission. When his family locked him up to prevent an elopement, she snuck into his room dressed as a bear with a traveling theater troupe. The couple escaped and married—but the law eventually caught up to them and the marriage was annulled. She then got caught publishing satirical works critical of King Louis XIV. La Force was exiled to a convent for this crime—where she wrote her book of fairy tales and a series of popular historical novels. Eventually released, she spent the rest of her life earning her own living through her writing.

Like all of La Force's fairy tales, "Persinette" is a sensual, sparkling confection with a sly,

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sharp humor at its center. It's not hard to see why the tale of a girl locked away in a tower would have appealed to her

Once upon a time, the tale begins, a young couple prepares for the birth of their child and all is well until the wife conceives a passion ate craving for parsley. Her doting husband steals the parsley out of a fairy s enchanted garden (The gate stands temptingly open, implying the fairy knows very well what will happen—and may, indeed, have magically caused the craving that sets the tale in motion Fairies are well known, after all, for their penchant for stealing infants) The second time the husband sneaks into the garden (again he finds the gate open), the fairy catches him and demands his unborn child as payment The man agrees "after a short deliberation " When his wife gives birth to a beautiful baby girl, she promptly hands the child over to the fairy without a word of protest.

The fairy raises the child tenderly until Persinette (as she's come to be called) reaches the age of puberty Then, in order to keep the girl safe from harm (the eyes and attention of men), the fairy builds a magnificent silver tower deep in the forest. It contains all that the girl could desire large and airy rooms elegantly furnished, wardrobes full of sumptuous clothes, delicious meals that are gracefully served by invisible fairy servants, books, paints, and instruments so Persinette need never be bored What it doesn t have is a door or stairs, so whenever the fairy comes to call she says, "Persinette, let down your hair," and she climbs up through the window.

Years pass, and one day the son of the king is hunting in the forest nearby He hears the maiden singing and falls in love with her, sight unseen. He finds his way to the tower and spies a shadowy figure far above—but when he calls to her, Persinette takes fright. It's been many years since she's seen a man, and the fairy has told her that some are monsters who can kill with a single look. The prince leaves discouraged, but he cannot forget the sound of that lonely, lovely voice He makes inquiries in a nearby village and learns that the girl is a fairy's prisoner.

The prince returns, waits, and watches how the fairy goes in and out of the tower The next day, when the fairy is gone, he stands and calls out in the fairy's voice, "Persinette, let down your hair " Her long gold hair comes tumbling down, he climbs, and steps into the tower Persinette is frightened once again—but she soon recovers her aplomb as the prince persuades her of his love. He proposes to marry her there and then, and she "consented without hardly knowing what she was doing. Even so," writes La Force archly, "she was able to complete the ceremony "

The prince continues to visit the tower, and before long Persinette grows fat. Innocent, she doesn't know she's pregnant—but the fairy certainly does. Furious, the fairy takes up a knife and cuts off Persinette's long braids, then she sends her off in a flash of fairy magic to a remote place The fairy hangs the braids from the tower window and waits for the prince to come. He clambers over the windowsill and is shocked to find his lover gone The fairy angrily informs the prince he'll never see Persinette again, and she flings him from the tower. He lands in briar thorns, which blind him.

For several years the prince wanders the world, living on charity, till at last he reaches a remote place where hears his wife singing. Persinette now has twin children, who instantly recognize the blind man as their father Persinette cries with joy, and her tears magically restore his sight

But wait! The fairy is still angry, and not yet prepared to leave them be. The food in the larder turns into stones, the well fills up with venomous snakes, the birds in the sky above turn into dragons breathing fire. The little family huddles together, preparing to die of the fairy's wrath—but the lovers are happy, nonetheless, to have found each other at last. At this, the fairy's heart finally melts She sees that their love is strong and true She forgives them, blesses their marriage, and transports them to the king's castle, where the king and queen welcome their son and his family with open arms

Friedrich Schultz's "Rapunzel," published in Germany one hundred years later, faithfully follows La Force's plot while toning down the flowery language common to fairy tales of the earlier period. The only marked change Schultz makes to the story is that the fairy is portrayed with greater sympathy Confronting Rapunzel's pregnancy, she s more Disappointed Mother than Vengeful Fury, and she doesn't throw the prince from the tower—he leaps himself, in a fit of despair. Overall, Schultz merely retell's La Force s tale rather than spinning it into something new

The oral version of "Rapunzel" collected by the Grimms half a century after the Schultz publication follows the Schultz and La Force plot and is clearly derived from one or both But the Grimms made several changes before they published their "Rapunzel" in 1857. Once again, the story begins with the overwhelming cravings of a pregnant woman. She craves rapunzel (a form of lettuce), which grows in the garden of a sorceress. (The Grimms often edited fairies out of their stories, for they considered the creatures to be too French. It was not until later English versions that the sorceress became a witch) When she reaches the age of puberty, the girl is locked up in a tower by the woman she now calls Mother Gothel (a generic name for a godmother) The tower has no door or stairs, and the only way to enter it is to stand and deliver the famous line "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair."

The prince hears the maiden singing, finds the tower, and cannot get into it He rides home again, but returns each day, compelled by the beauty of her song When he sees the sorceress come and go, he learns at last how the tower is entered. "If that's the ladder one needs," he says, "I'm also going to try my luck."

He enters the tower, calms the frightened princess, and declares his undying love for her. He offers her his hand in marriage, and Rapunzel chastely accepts. Thereafter, he visits Rapunzel each evening when Mother Gothel is safely away Each time he comes, he brings a skein of silk so she can weave a ladder to escape

One day, as the sorceress climbs her hair, Rapunzel absentmindedly asks her why she is so much heavier than the prince Mother Gothel guesses all and flies into a terrible rage She cuts off Rapunzel's hair, banishes her to a distant wilderness, and waits for the prince to come that night, then she confronts him with his crimes. He leaps from the tower, is blinded by the thorns, and then wanders the world seeking Rapunzel—who's now referred to as his "wife " They reunite, his sight is restored, and he learns he has two children now He takes them home to his father's court, and no further mention is made of Mother Gothel

Although the Grimms originally expected their folk tale collection to be of interest primarily to scholars, they soon realized they had a large and lucrative readership among children and their parents Thus, with each subsequent edition, they edited the stories further to make them more appropriate for young readers, deleting sexual references and making heroines more virtuously moral. Thus, in their version of "Rapunzel," they glide right over the conception of the twins, and over the fact of her pregnancy, until the children appear, without explanation, at the story's end. Because of the worldwide popularity of the Grimms' now-classic volume of tales, this children's version of "Rapunzel" is the one best known today

As fairy tales continued to be pushed to the children's shelves in the 20th century, the Grimms' version of "Rapunzel" was retold over and over in countless picture books—sometimes edited further to delete the existence of those awkward twins altogether. In the public mind, Rapunzel's tale was one intended for very young readers—with few realizing that at its root is a story about puberty, sexual desire, and the evils of locking young women away from life and self-determination. In the children's version, Rapunzel is just another passive princess waiting for her prince to come. In the older tales we glimpse a different story, about a girl whose life is utterly controlled by greedy, selfish, capricious adults until she disobeys, chooses her own fate, and bursts from captivity into adult life, symbolized by the birth of her own children in a distant land

In the latter decades of the 20th century, Rapunzel's story began to change again as fairy tales began reappearing in poetry and fiction for adult readers This new literary fairy tale movement was pioneered by feminist writers such as Anne Sexton and Angela

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Carter, and by genre writers such as Robin McKinley, Jane Yolen, and Tanith Lee

Donna Jo Napoli's *Zel*, for example, is one of the very best renditions of the Rapunzel fairy tale (You'll find it on the YA fiction shelves, but I recommend it to adult readers.) The novel is set in Switzerland in the middle of the 16th century, told from the points of view of three characters Zel (Rapunzel), her mother (combining the role of mother and witch), and Konrad (the son of a count) This is a dark, psychologically complex story, delving deep into each character's psyche. a mother unhinged by the possessive nature of her love, a daughter scarred by imprisonment, a young man obsessively in love with a girl he barely knows. It's a taut, beautifully written novel and highly recommended

Robin McKinley's story "Touk's House" in another one to see on the YA shelves (published in her collection *A Knot in the Grain and Other Stories*) McKinley uses elements from Rapunzel, but reworks the plot extensively. Here, a woodcutter's newborn daughter is the price he pays for stealing healing herbs The witch is a sympathetic figure, raising the girl like her own daughter and teaching her the herb lore with which she'll eventually win the hand of a prince. But the girl doesn't want the prince in the end, choosing the witch's sweet son instead Gregory Frost's "The Root of the Matter," by contrast, is a dark and very adult tale exploring the sexual tensions inherent in the story, and its consequences Here Mother Gothel is a woman deeply damaged by a history of abuse, and she in turn damages the child has she forcibly adopted. The story is told from three points of view- Mother Gothel, Rapunzel, and the Prince—the latter two undergoing true transformation by the story's end

Abuse also factors into Esther Friesner's darkly comic story "Big Hair," about a girl on the beauty pageant circuit, her life controlled by her witch-like mother The "prince" is a newspaper reporter who sneaks past the watchful mother's guard, and here too, we see how abuse is cycled and a maiden can become a witch. Lisa Russ Spaar's story "Rapunzel's Exile" is brief but packs an emotional wallop Spaar imagines Rapunzel's journey as her Godmother leads her into the forest, and her dawning horror as she realizes that the tower will be her fate For twelve years her Godmother raised her kindly, but now, with the onset of menstruation (her skirts still bloody, her body still seeping), her Godmother has turned into a different creature, pushing her into the tower at knifepoint, and walling up the door with stones

Illustrator Arthur Rackham created several color plates for a 1920 edition of Hansel and Gretel and Other Tales

The heroine of Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Hair" has chosen to live in a crooked stone tower She's blind, and she has come to fear the sounds of the forest around her "Block up the windows and doors," she tells the wise-woman who is her guardian and companion One night a prince hears her singing, climbs up the tower, and introduces her to love But soon she learns that the unseen prince is not quite what she thought.... Elizabeth Lynn's delightful "The Princess in the Tower" is set in an obscure and remote village somewhere in the hills of Europe- a place with fabulous, fattening food and where zaftig women are prized. Poor Margentina is so slim that everyone thinks she's ill and hideous She stays in the family house in shame, trying to no avail to put on weight—until a young man stumbles into the village, hears her singing from her high window, falls in love, and whisks her away to marry him and start a restaurant The charm of the story lies in Lynn's telling and in the sumptuous food descriptions. Anne Bishop's "Rapunzel" is a moving tale that is broken into three distinct parts- the mother's story, the witch's story, and finally Rapunzel's story. The first two parts are contrasting narratives of jealousy and greed, the third follows Rapunzel to the wilderness, where she finds new life beyond the tower.

Contemporary poets have also looked at the tale through the eyes of its different characters, finding in the story's themes issues relevant to our lives today

Carolyn Nolen-Williams gives voice to the least sympathetic character in the story in "Rapunzel's Mother" I can't explain why I wanted that simple / thing so much dark green rampion leaves, the curled / coverlets of them stacked together on the side board, / the rainy steam of them cooking, the hot full softness / and the bittersweet bite in my throat, mouthful after mouthful It was as if there was no other way to keep alive "

Nicole Cooley reflects on a troubled mother-daughter relationship in her poem "Rampion" Tiny blue flowers furred with dirt are all the woman desires / in the story my mother reads over and over Once upon a time / a woman longed for a child, but see how one desire easily / replaces the next, see her husband climbing the tall garden wall with a handful of rampion, flowering scab she's traded for a child Look, my mother says, see / how the mother disappears / as rampions metallic root splits the tongue like a knife / and the daughter spends the rest of the story alone

Dorothy Hewett's chilling poem "Grave Fairy Tale" looks at the witch through Rapunzel's eyes She was there when I woke, blocking the light, / or in the night, humming, trying on my clothes. / I grew accustomed to her; she was as much a part of me / as my own self, sometimes I thought, "She is myself" / a posturing blackness, savage as a cuckoo

Both Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas cast the relationship between Rapunzel and Mother Gothel as a sexual one In Sexton's "Rapunzel," she writes of a lesbian affair between a student and her mentor, which the younger woman ends when a "prince" offers her a more socially acceptable life- As for Mother Gothel, / her heart shrank to the size of a pin, / never again to say, Hold me my young dear, / hold me, / and only as she dreamt of the yellow hair / did moonlight sift into her mouth

Broumas, by contrast, celebrates such relationships in her answering poem "Rapunzel," writing in the voice of a younger woman who has no such temptation to stray: Climb / through my hair, climb in / to me, love hovers here like a mother's wish ... How many women / have yearned for our lush perennial, found / themselves pregnant, and had / to subdue their heat, drown out their appetite / with pickles and hard weeds

David Trinidad's "Rapunzel" grows desperate in her isolation. Like hair, the days and nights are growing longer and longer. / ...And

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COMING SOON

each evening the crone comes Her crackled fingers appear / pinching the key ./ If only once she'd say, "Here, / take this pair of scissors and cut your hair before it twists / into spaces between the bricks like vines." I'd slit my wrists

In Liz Locchead's "Three Twists," on the other hand, Rapunzel discovers there are worse things than solitude—like a prince who hasn't got a clue about what she really needs & just when our maiden had got / good & used to her isolation / stopped daily expecting to be rescued, / had come almost to love her tower, / along comes This Prince / with absolutely all the wrong answers

The prince in Sara Henderson Hay's "Rapunzel" is all too skilled at the language of love: Oh God, let me forget the things he said

Let me not lie another night awake / Repeating all the promises he made..../I knew I was not the first to twist / Her heartstrings to a rope for him to climb / I might have known I would not be the last

Alice Friman's poem "Rapunzel" portrays a bit more sympathy for the prince If she was unwise about such things / that girls are taught of men / with chocolate kisses / who offer lifts to lessons / who stand too close in subways / playing with their change / then what was he? / Caught in that small room, / the braid / coiling the floorboards like a snake, / and she all Rubens-ripe and curious

Oh, the tower singing on the wheezy couch Forbidden fruits in platters of her flesh / and he with scars to touch along his side / and many wondrous things to name

Bruce Bennett's "The Skeptical Prince" wants proof that there's really a maiden in that tower The town has grown accustomed to the sight he drinks by day, then hangs around at night, purveying sad and antiquated lore, / insisting he will act once he is sure

In "Rapunzel" by Arlene Ang, we never quite know what it is the prince encounters in the tower Is it the witch with Rapunzel's braids, or Rapunzel herself who is terrifying? The twelfth prince climbed the tower / on golden tresses he knew were here. / When he penetrated her window, / she turned away to light the fire / His eyes blinded by hair that mirrored / the leap of flames she stoked, / the prince failed to see the woodpile / of chewed bones at the corner of the hearth

Essex Hemphill's "Song of Rapunzel" reminds us that sometimes men need rescuing too: His hair / almost touches / his shoulders / He dreams / of long braids. / ladders vines of hair / He stands / like Rapunzel, waiting on his balcony / to be rescued / from the fire breathing / dragons of loneliness

Rosemary Dun's "Rapunzel" rescues herself from prince and tower alike: ...I cut off the long hank of my / just-for-him hair with golden shears, / so that / no more would he climb, / prick my finger, / nor ravish me awake. / Instead, my howls which once / had filled my madwoman's attic / with despair announce the birth of my / daughter. / We hold hands and jump

Lisa Russ Spaar's "Rapunzel Shorn" is a young woman tasting sweet freedom at last I'm redeemed, head light / as seed mote, as a fasting / girl's among these thorns, lips / and fingers bloody with fruit. / Years I dreamed of this / the green, laughing arms / of old trees extended over me, / my shadow lost among theirs

Gwen Straus's "The Prince" is an old man now, living with his beloved wife and looking back over the events of his life. For a long time I was blind, / even before the thorns tattered my eyes. / I was bored, handsome, a Prince. / The thrill was in what I could get away with./...All my childhood I heard about love / but I thought only witches could grow it / in gardens behind walls too high to climb

Rapunzel's story has become part of our folk tradition because its themes are universal and timeless. We've all hungered for things with too high a price; we've all felt imprisoned by another's demands, we've all been carried away by love, only to end up blinded and broken; we all hope for grace at the end of our suffering and a happy ending. The story has additional resonance, of course, for those of us who were given up by one or both of our birth parents, as it does for those raised by parents who are overprotective or overcontrolling. In the end, the story tells us, we have to leave the tower one way or another, weave a ladder or leap into the thorns. We can't stay in childhood forever The adult world, with all its terrors and wonders, waits for us just beyond the forest. ❧

Further Reading

Novels:

- *Tar* by Donna Jo N... (Dutton, 1996)

Short Stories:

- "Rapunzel" by Anne Bishop, from *Black Swan White Raven* (Avon, 1997)
- "The Tale of the Hair" by Emma Donoghue, from *Kissing the Witch* (Harper Collins, 1997)
- "Big Hair" by Esther Friesner, from *Black Heart Ivory Bones* (Avon, 2000)
- "The Root of the Matter" by ... *White, Blood Red* (Avon, 1995)
- "The G... ...mithuse from *Blood* (DAW, 1983)
- "Rapunzel" by Tanith Lee, from *Black Heart Ivory Bones* (Avon, 2000)
- "The Princess in the Tower" by Elizabeth Lynn, from *Snow White, ...* (Avon, 1...
- "... ..." by Robin ... Kinley, from *A Knot in ...*
- "The Girl in ... Lois Mc...
- "... ... Upon a Time"
- "Rapunzel" by ... Spaar, from ... (Vol. 4, 1996)

Children's Books:

- *Golden* by Cameron ... (Simon Pulse)
- "... ...unzel" by ... Sara Holmes (Dennis L... ...)
- "Rapunzel" by Bruce Broumas, from *Beginning With O* (Yale University Press, 1977)
- "... ..." by Rosemary Dun, from ...
- "Rampion" by Nicole ... oley, from *The P...*
- "Rapunzel" by Alice ... Friman, from *Reporting from Corinth* (Norton Press, 1984)
- "Rapunzel" by ... ...dersen Hay, from *S...*
- ... Hemphill, from ... *...emories* (Plume, 1992)
- "... Twists" by Liz ... Lochhead, from *Dreaming Frankenstein* (Polygon Books, 1984)
- "... ...unzel" by William ... Morris, from *The Defense ... ...* (1858; also available online at www.surlalune.com/fairytales.com)
- "Rapunzel" by Anne ... ...on, from *Transformations* (Houghton Mifflin, 1971)
- "The Prince" by Gwen ... Straus, from *Trail of Stones* (Knopf, 19...
- "Rapunzel" by Dav... ... ...n Pavonine ... ...erwood Press, 198...

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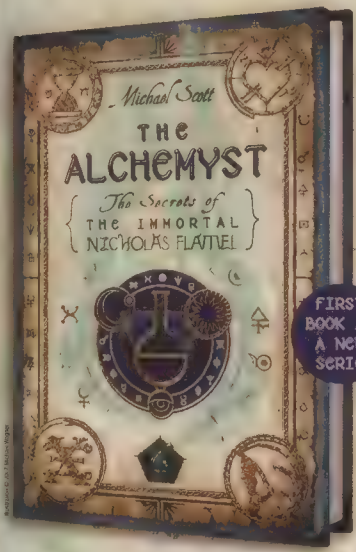

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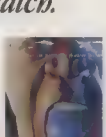
By Paul Witcover

Sergei Lukyanenko explores the dark side in his second Watch novel, *Day Watch.*



There's something deliciously familiar about the Watch novels of Russian speculative fiction writer Sergei Lukyanenko. The series began with *Night Watch*, continues in ***Day Watch*** (the subject of this review, Miramax Books, New York, trade paperback, 453 pp., $13.95, ISBN 978-1-4013-6020-7), and is slated for at least two more volumes, *Twilight Watch* and *Final Watch*. Putting their inventive fantastic elements briefly aside, to read them is to re-enter the gloomy, morally relativistic universe of the great Cold War novels of John le Carré. In novels like *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and *Smiley's People*, layered with betrayals of self and other, good and evil were abstract notions that had little direct impact on characters whose decisions and actions inhabited gray areas of a bleak twilight world in which political loyalties were for the most part conditional and personal attachments were weaknesses to be hidden or exploited. As for love, it was a force more to be feared than desired, capable of bestowing redemption, even salvation, but also a cause of destruction, tragedy, and death.

The painting on the cover of The Game, *a YA book reviewed in this column was created by Rick Berry. www.braid.com*

All of these characteristics are on full display in the Watch novels, which have been huge bestsellers in Russia, and which have been somewhat loosely—okay, very loosely—adapted into a trilogy of films, two of which have been made so far: *Night Watch*, which is well worth renting, and *Day Watch*, which opens in the United States this summer.

Not even the able skills of translator Andrew Bromfield can disguise the fact that Lukyanenko isn't as good a writer as le Carré—but then, few are. However, he's plenty good enough to make *Night Watch* and *Day Watch* compulsively readable. And Lukyanenko does possess one valuable literary quality that even le Carré, at his finest, lacks: he's Russian. Not only that, he was born in 1968 and so spent his formative years experiencing the slow decay of the Soviet Union, as well as the anarchy that followed.

From Gogol to Bulgakov, Russian literature has been distinguished by an affinity for sharp satire, a keen appreciation for the absurdities of life under a restrictive political system and attendant bureaucracy whose sinister qualities are exceeded only by its ineptitude, an embrace of the fantastic that seems less about escape from a harsh and arbitrary reality than (as with magical realism) a kind of alchemical engagement with it, and a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for the elaboration of political, social, and philosophical ideas. These national literary qualities were, if anything, exacerbated by the years of Soviet rule, and they appear to have emerged stronger than ever. Certainly Lukyanenko has absorbed them thoroughly, and they impart to the pages of *Night Watch* and *Day Watch* a bracing cynicism and mordant humor that is more than a bit reminiscent of noir fiction and film, and of cyberpunk, but seems imbued with a distinctively Russian cast: an expectation that the worst will happen; a stubborn hope that it will not; the ability to laugh when it does, and cry too, and for both the laughter and the tears to

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seem like acts of bravery rather than cheap bravado or sentimental indulgence.

Interestingly, Lukyanenko has a co-writer for this novel only- Vladimir Vasiliev, another Russian speculative fiction author. Vasiliev has written a solo novel set in the world of the Watches *Face of the Dark Palmira*, as yet untranslated into English. Lukyanenko, who is known to be supportive of fanfic based on his work, seems at least by Western standards, to be unusually generous when it comes to letting people play in his sandbox. Perhaps that spirit of communalism is a holdover from the Soviet era. In any case, the presence of a co-writer hasn't impacted *Day Watch* either positively or negatively in any noticeable way; the title page is the only one that testifies to Vasiliev's presence, there is no appreciable difference between the quality of *Night Watch* and *Day Watch*, which means that Vasiliev has filled his role as irreproachably as Bromfield.

In the world of the Watches there are ordinary humans, and there are Others. Others come in a number of varieties: vampires, shape-shifters, magicians, witches, and so on. But all these sub-types are divided into two overarching camps: the Light and the Dark.

Beneath the world of everyday reality is a substrate called the Twilight, which consists of seven progressively deeper levels. It's the ability to access the Twilight that makes someone an Other. Access is gained by stepping into or through one's own shadow, thus leads to the uppermost level of the Twilight.

The Twilight has some interesting properties. It's not alive or intelligent per se, at least not in any way the Others can understand, but it does demonstrate some agency on occasion, like a system that seeks equilibrium.

The more powerful an Other is, the deeper he or she can go into the Twilight. But without the proper training, even the most naturally powerful Other will die the first time he or she enters the Twilight. This is because the Twilight sucks the life-force out of anyone who enters it. It feeds on Others. And an inexperienced Other will go in too deep, or stay in too long, to get back out again. So the most important lesson an Other learns, assuming he or she survives long enough after entering the Twilight for the first time, is how to exit.

The other important thing that occurs when an Other enters the Twilight for the first time is that an instinctive chance is made between the Light and the Dark. Basically, Light Others are protective of normal people, their magical abilities strengthened by positive human emotions. Dark Others are not evil per se but rather selfish and individualistic. The Light Others want to shepherd humanity to paradise — whether the rest of us want to get there or not. The Dark Others just want to be left alone.

The Light Others believe in the Golden Rule, the Dark Others follow the law of the jungle.

Or so it was once, in the past, when the world was almost destroyed because of the unregulated conflicts between Light and Dark. For their own survival, the two sides entered into a treaty strictly stipulating what each is permitted to do to the other and to normal humans. Generally speaking, a balance was achieved, with each "good" act allowing a commensurate "evil" response, and vice versa.

The Light Others set up an agency devoted to monitoring the Dark Others and ensuring their compliance with the Treaty; this agency is called the Night Watch. The Dark Others set up a similar agency, the Day Watch, devoted to monitoring the Light Others. A third agency, the Inquisition, made up of both Light and Dark Others, acts as a kind of judicial entity with authority over the other two.

In *Night Watch*, the focus was on Anton Gorodetsky, a second-level mage plucked from a technical post and sent out into the field to track down a rogue vampire. In the course of this, he became swept up in a convoluted scheme centered around Svetlana, a young woman with the potential to become a sorceress powerful enough to permanently swing the balance of power over to the Light. The head of the Day Watch, a "beyond classification" mage named Zabulon, seeks to kill her before this can happen. In the course of protecting Svetlana, Anton discovers that the head of the Night Watch, Gesar, another "beyond classification" mage, has callously manipulated him, and he also learns that the Light Others are perhaps responsible for more human misery than the Dark Others, due to their propensity for launching vast utopian movements such as Communism, which invariably up over into the dark side. Lukyanenko is superb at pacing the reader's revelations to those of Gorodetsky, so that we share his shock and disgust at what he can only view as a deeply personal betrayal.

Svetlana is once again at the center of *Day Watch*. And once again, Anton, embittered now by his experiences yet still loyal to the Night Watch, not least because he and Svetlana have become lovers, will be manipulated by both Gesar and Zabulon to ends beyond his ability to see and judge. But as the novel's title implies, the focus this time is much more on the Dark Others; indeed, each of the three linked novellas that together make up the book is told primarily from the perspective of a Dark Other. They are pieces of a puzzle that gradually comes together, culminating in a tribunal before the Inquisition that will determine the fate of characters we have grown to care for, as well as the future of Light and Dark.

You might think that it's difficult to engage a reader's sympathies for characters who are Dark Others, but Lukyanenko is up to the task. In the second-level magician Edgar, Lukyanenko creates a worthy counterpart to Anton, not so much an adversary as a doppelganger, a mirror image.

Lukyanenko also shines a light onto the hitherto mysterious Inquisition, and what's revealed is truly disturbing. "I understand what makes the Night Watch observe the Treaty," Anton remarks to an Inquisitor at one point. "We're afraid for people. And I know what motivates the Day Watch—fear for themselves. But what makes you Inquisitors go against your own essential nature?"

The Inquisitor replies, "The only thing that restrains you is fear, Anton Gorodetsky. For yourself, or for other people—that's not important. But we are restrained by horror."

That horror, which is as much moral miasma as magical manifestation, comes relentlessly to the foreground of the novel, infecting everything and everyone with its grim and implacable imminence. Against it, characters like Edgar, Anton, and Svetlana struggle to retain some vestige of humanity.

Endless Things: A Part of Aegypt, John Crowley, Small Beer Press, Northampton, MA, hardcover, 400 pp., $24.00, ISBN 978-1-931520-225

Books intended for the young adult market are increasingly crossing over to the adult market. Young readers make more sophisticated book choices, and YA authors are making every effort to meet their needs. Although marketed to teenagers **Vintage: A Ghost Story** by Steve Berman (Haworth Positronic Press: Binghamton, NY 2007, 148 pp.

A Gay, Goth Ghost Story

sofficover) offers more than enough to intrigue an adult reader. The main character is a seventeen-year old gay boy who has run away from his unaccepting family to live with his aunt. He desperately wants to fit in and to find love, but is always aware of his difference. He finds a best friend in a girl with her own fractured family, but still wants more.

But is the ghost he encounters walking along a highway in the middle of the night the answer? The ghost, a star athlete killed in 1957, begins to haunt the teen, drawing him into a nightmare of dangerous obsession.

With exceptional skill and insight, Berman takes his readers on a fast-paced, intense journey with many twists and turns. It has chills and thrills and dark humor, but ultimately it is a touching coming-of-age story to which readers of all ages will be able to relate. After a whirlwind first read, you'll be compelled to start over at a more leisurely pace to savor the details and precise writing style.

Laura Cleveland

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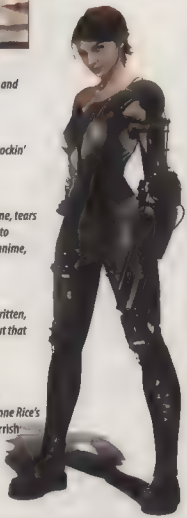
SFFWORLD



Quantum Gravity Book One

Justina Robson

337 pp / ISBN 978-1-59102-539-9
Trade Paperback / $15

Prom Dates From Hell, by Rosemary Clement-Moore, Delacorte Press, March 2007

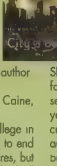
Maggie Quinn has way too much on her agenda, what with yearbook, photography, and not being a brainless idiot like some people she could name, to worry about prom. Unfortunately, it looks like she's going to have to attend whether she likes it or not. Something strange is happening at Avalon High, with bad luck and horrible accidents befalling the most popular kids in school, and Maggie's prophetic dreams may hold a clue to defeating whatever's behind it all. Think you know what's going on? You may be surprised. Clement-Moore is off to a great start with this book, featuring an intelligent, capable heroine that takes the best from both Buffy Summers' and Nancy Drew's playbooks. I'm definitely looking forward to more from this author

The Dead Girls' Dance, by Rachel Caine, NAL Jam, April 2007

When Claire Danvers went off to college in Morganville, Texas, she never expected to end up in a town utterly controlled by vampires, but she's not about to let them push her around. She'll do what she must to stay alive and get through college. Unfortunately, trouble just keeps on coming, and now she and her friends are caught in a vampiric power struggle further exacerbated by the arrival of a gang of vampire-hunting bikers with a rather personal connection to Claire's kind-of boyfriend, Shane. And when Shane is slated for execution for a crime he didn't commit, Claire and her remaining friends will have to go to extraordinary lengths to save the day, especially when things get violent, and bloody. Caine's continuation of the Morganville Vampires saga features a feisty, clever heroine and a rich cast of characters, including an oddly sympathetic master vampire. This is a great new series.

Worldweavers: Gift of the Unmage, by Alma Alexander, Eos, March 2007

In a world where almost everyone possesses magic, Thea Winthrop, the seventh child of two seventh children, was expected to surpass them all. Thus, her total lack of magic dismays and disappoints her entire family. As a last-ditch effort, Thea is sent to study with a mysterious mentor who helps her to unlock her true potential - a potential she must keep secret from everyone, especially the sinister Alphiri, a cold, calculating mercantile race from another dimension. Sent to the Wandless Academy, a last-ditch school for people without, or adversely affected by, magic, Thea must further develop her gifts and bond with her new friends before a bizarre evil can destroy them all. An excellent start to a new series, with a fascinating premise, this nevertheless feels like two books joined in the middle. However, the concept is intriguing, and there's a lot of potential left to be explored in future books. I'll be keeping an eye on this series.



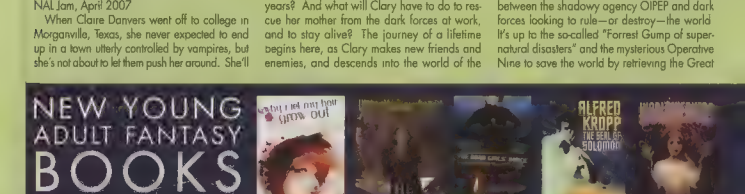
City of Bones, by Cassandra Clare, McElderberry Books, April 2007

A chance encounter in a New York club thrusts Clary Fray into a strange, violent world of demons and demon hunters, a world she never knew existed before now. Who are the Shadowhunters, and how exactly has Clary's fate become entangled with theirs? What secrets has her mother kept from her all these years? And what will Clary have to do to rescue her mother from the dark forces at work, and to stay alive? The journey of a lifetime begins here, as Clary makes new friends and enemies, and descends into the world of the Shadowhunters. Dark and edgy, City of Bones constantly surprises with its plot twists and emotional turns. This is the start of an exciting new series, and I can hardly wait to see what else Clare has to offer in the next volume.

Upset by a bad breakup, sixteen-year-old Morgan cuts her hair and dies it orange, prompting her parents to send her on a bicycle tour of Ireland for the summer. As the tour makes its way across Ireland, Morgan struggles with feelings of alienation and resentment. Meanwhile, her involuntary visits to a mythic version of Ireland's past, complete with fairies, curses, and legendary heroes, provide her with a real challenge. Now, recast as a myth in her own right, she has to perform some impossible tasks to unlock the secret of her time-traveling. This is one vacation she'll never forget. This is a rather charming, entertaining book that shamelessly plunders Irish myth without adhering to the strict details. The cover, by Sarah Howell, is eye-catching and memorable.

Alfred Kropp: The Seal of Solomon, by Rick Yancey, Bloomsbury, May 2007

Everyone's favorite accidental hero, Alfred Kropp, the last descendant of Lancelot, is back. Once again dragged into a bizarre adventure, this time he's caught in a dangerous struggle between the shadowy agency OIPEP and dark forces looking to rule—or destroy—the world. It's up to the so-called "Forrest Gump of supernatural disasters" and the mysterious Operative Nine to save the world by retrieving the Great Seal of Solomon before a horde of demons can be unleashed. But is Alfred strong enough to resist the temptation of ultimate power? This one has it all: adventure, excitement, a demon-possessed lawn gnome, and a likeable reluctant hero who provides a distinctively wry viewpoint as he struggles to fulfill his destiny. Yancey definitely knows how to deliver the goods.



The Game, by Diana Wynne Jones, Firebird, March 2007

After Haylay is sent to spend time with her family in Ireland, she's surprised to learn just how many aunts, uncles and cousins she actually has. Luckily, they don't let her feel left-out for long, and before she knows it, Haylay's participating in a strange game the children play involving trips to a magical realm called the mythosphere. Her trips into the mythosphere, and her interactions with the various beings that inhabit it, help her to understand the true nature and origins of her family, and her own place in the world. Magic and mythology interweave in this charming, clever novella, and Jones is clearly at the top of her game here.

Why I Let My Hair Grow Out, by Maryrose Wood, Berkley Jam, March 2007

Iris, Messenger, by Sarah Deming, Harcourt, May 2007

When Iris Greenwald receives a mysterious book of Greek myths for her birthday, it begins a series of quests in which she discovers the Greek gods, alive if somewhat diminished and existing in secret all around her—performing in a jazz club, working at a beauty parlor, or cooking at a fish shack, for instance. As she tracks down the gods and learns their stories, she also learns about her own role in the grand scheme of things. This is a fun story that combines sly humor and genuine sentimentality as it explores the role of myth in today's society, without taking itself too seriously.

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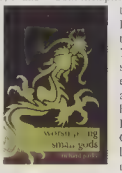
John Crowley's masterful meditation on memory, history, and magic, which began twenty years ago with the novel *Aegypt* and continued in *Love and Sleep* (1994) and *Daemonomania* (2000), concludes now on a softly falling note of hard-won wisdom and heart-stirring grace in *Endless Things*, a title whose multiple exfoliations of meaning are perfectly suited to a book, a quartet of books, that is itself brilliantly, almost exhaustively, overdetermined, in the way that dreams or poems are overdetermined: packed with more causes than can be strictly accounted for in detailing their effects upon us.



It's accurate but misleading to say that *Endless Things* takes place nine years after the events of *Daemonomania*, for in a series of novels that treats vast swathes of time and space, to say nothing of fiction and history, as puzzle pieces to be shuffled at will or whimsy, any attempt to anchor oneself in what Crowley at one point calls "alternats" is useless, because there is more than one history of the world , except, of course, that there isn't, not really, not anymore. Just once, a "once" repeated at irregular intervals, those branching Ys of history's roads intersect with us, or we with them, two (or more) roads diverging in the yellow wood of our days and all days, and just for an instant a kind of magic glimmers, possibility springs into being, choices exist that weren't there before, that won't be there again once a choice is made, whether by us or by some process that sweeps us along doesn't really matter Or perhaps nothing else matters

In *Little, Big* there is an orrery, a construct both metaphor and machine that haunts and then powers the house called Edgewood long after its inhabitants are fled or dead *Endless Things* is itself a kind of orrery, spanning in its perfect cycles and epicycles even after the events at the heart of the Aegypt series have concluded, characters like Pierce Moffett, Rosie Rasmussen, Giordano Bruno, and Fellowes Kraft are orbs upon that intricate and beautiful machine, whose purpose and effect is both plain and hidden, like some alchemical device whose true function is no longer recognizable to us, because its function was precisely to bring into being this world whose people cannot recognize its function Yet it moves still, every part of it, accordingly to laws that are perhaps not even the intended effects of its original function but simply what remains from them

There is something almost inexpressibly sad in that, and that sense of loss, of regret for the road taken or not taken, permeates this novel even when it is at its most generous in the dispensation of happiness to characters we care deeply about and wish only the best for Because like them, like their creator, we are no longer what we were when, once upon a time, we set out upon this journey. "It was all anyway a long time ago." Crowley writes in *Little Big*: "the world, we know now, is as it is and not different, if there was ever a time when there were passages, doors, the borders open and many crossing, that time is not now. The world is older than it was " The orrery spins on

Worshipping Small Gods, Richard Parks, Prime Books, trade paperback, 250 pp., $14.95, ISBN 978-0-8095-5745-5

I was a big admirer of Richard Parks's World Fantasy Award-nominated first collection, *The Ogre's Wife*, and this new collection, featuring fourteen stories, two of which are appearing in print for the first time, and seven of which first appeared in the pages of this magazine is even better. a captivating showcase for a writer whose subtle storytelling gifts have a way of creeping up on you

Parks is a student of world mythologies, with a special interest in Asian myth and legend, and he is an expert at finding the surprising side of myths that we think we know too well already to be surprised by In "Kallisti," for example, Parks writes of the golden apple of discord and locates a poignant angle of approach that shines an unexpected light on the goddess Eris, the Trojan War, and

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the oft-maligned figure of Paris

Again and again, Parks displays an unerring instinct for approaching familiar material in a fresh yet straightforward way, and so enter taining is he in the course of doing so that it might take a moment or two before you real ize that the story you've read is not just a glittering entertainment but also contains some profound and even sobering truths. Other highlights include a suite of sharp alternate-world near-future ghost stories-cum-mysteries featuring Eli Mothersbaugh, a ghost hunter from the Bureau of Bio-Remnant Reconciliation, and the title story, a zenlike gem in which a mountain god and a saint come to an impasse over a bridge.

Churlish as it may seem to ask for more from a writer as prolific and rewarding as Richard Parks, I'm going to ask anyway: Richard, if you're reading this, how about a novel?

No Dominion. Charlie Huston. Del Rey, New York, trade paperback, 256 pp., $13.95, ISBN 978-0-345-47825-2

Does the world really need another vampire detective? Well, no. But I wouldn't mind killing off a few of the undead gumshoes currently taking up shelf space and replacing them with this one by Charlie Huston, a talented young writer whose dark, witty, violent and morally complex vision of a New York City is as fresh a take on fang noir as I've seen in a long, long time. *Already Dead*, the impressively hard-boiled first novel in this series introduced the down-at-the-heels independent vampire contractor Joe Pitt, who sells his services, mostly of the strong-arm variety, to clients who include the various vampiric clans and gangs who, among themselves, have divvied up the city into territories whose boundaries are to be violated only by the powerful, the insane, or the suicidal. In Huston's world most normal human beings have no idea that vampires exist, nor any clue of the power they wield over the city by night ... and by day.

Huston's brand of vampirism is a virus—actually, it's called the Vyrus, an infection that may or may not have a suprabiological basis. Huston is not uninterested in the metaphysics of vampirism, but his hero, while no dummy is a man of action, the kind of man whose principles, while not exactly ethical by any usual measure, are nonetheless exacting and rigorously adhered to, even when, which as you may imagine is quite often the case, they do not work in his best interest. This makes Pitt an engagingly imperfect figure, a knight in muddy armor who just can't help doing the right thing, even if it's for all the wrong reasons.

The Vyrus kills its hosts sooner or later even if they keep it primed with fresh human blood, but Huston's vampires can expect lives of centuries—if other vamps, Van Helsings (as the vamps term the occasional human stalker), or their own anomie or stupidity doesn't kill them first. Sunlight kills them, as does a stake through the heart. But what absolutely will not kill them is any usual illness or toxic shock to the system, including an overdose of drugs or alcohol. o vamps tend to party hardy, even though the Vyrus cleanses their systems so quickly, they barely cop a buzz.

But now a new drug has suddenly arrived on the scene. A drug that pretty much does for vamps what crack does for humans. Pitt finds himself sucked into the mystery of where the new drug is coming from, who is supplying it, and why—a quest that leads him to Harlem and even further uptown, and to a confrontation with one of the most harrowingly vile monsters I can recall, a hellish cross between Cruella de Vile, Miss Havisham, and Blanche Dubois.

Huston is in fine form as he relates Pitt's blood-soaked odyssey, an epic journey full of double-crosses and hair's-breadth escapes, peopled with eccentric characters who will

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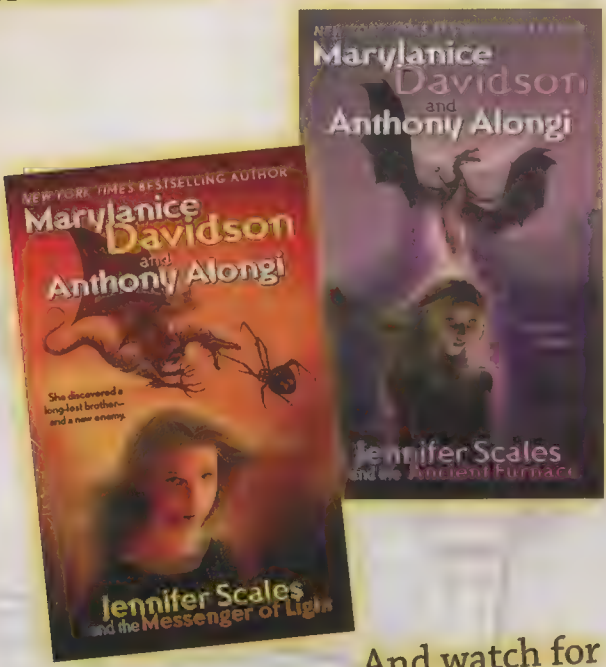

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make your blood run cold one minute and having you laughing out loud the next. He gets New York City dead right, as only a long-time resident can. It's that pitch perfect quality of setting as well as the tight writing and the memorable characters, that makes No Dominion worth picking up — and very hard to put down.

When They Came, Don Webb, Temporary Culture, New Jersey, mass market 222 pp., $20.00, ISBN 0-9764660-1-5.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about H.P. Lovecraft—which could almost be the opening sentence of a story in this excellent collection by Don Webb . . . but I digress.

I remember how fascinating it was, beginning around the time of *Blade Runner*, to watch as American culture caught up to Philip K. Dick's distinctive brand of political-cum-metaphysical paranoia..., and how as the trajectory of the cultural zeitgeist intersected with Dick's bizarre if compelling pseudo-religious system, suddenly Dick, or versions of Dick, some of higher fidelity than others, were everywhere, as though his death had freed him from more than just the paltry limitations of the body. Misunderstood, appropriated, flat-out ripped off, he was hailed as a prophet of the new order, the new millennium.

The same thing appears to be happening now with Lovecraft: his bleak, inhuman vision of unparalleled cosmic horror is somehow coming to mesh with aspects of our culture, our world.

This collection of twenty-three stories by Webb only confirmed my apprehensions. A number of the stories here are explicit homages to Lovecraft, set in, or in recognizable versions of, his distinctive mythos, and they are very well done indeed, but the true standouts are those in which Webb cuts loose from Cthulhu and his ilk and writes about worlds that are permeated to their very atoms with Lovecraft's chilly, unhospitable vision yet do not lean or rely upon his rather clumsy embodiments of the same. A sequence of stories revolving around a popular New Age self-help book, *The Yellow Flower*, shows off this aspect of Webb's talents. Each story is grounded in the particulars of its unique characters, yet they are nevertheless all linked by the book and its mysterious power to encourage insanity and otherwise warp the lives of those with whom, however tangentially, it comes into contact. Flannery O'Connor wrote about the Church of Christ Without Christ, in Webb's best stories, he establishes the Church of Lovecraft Without Lovecraft. Sooner or later, we will all worship there. ❧

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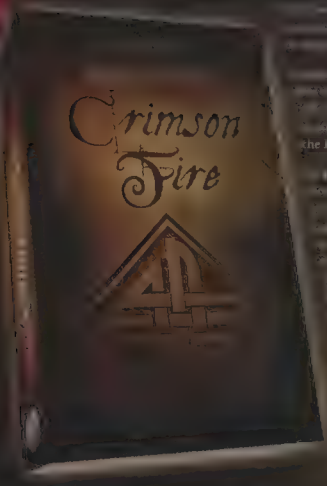

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BY CHERITH BALDRY ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE PUI-MUN LAW

waiting at the door

Great sins demand great sacrifices.

LORD CORYDALIS LEANED AGAINST A TREE, TWIRLING A ROSE IN LONG, slender fingers, and gazed at the group of courtiers clustered around the fountain. Queen Myrrhis sat in the midst of them, crowned with flowers, her laughter soft as the springing water that dampened her silks with its spray. Corydalis's stomach churned with fury as she held out a hand to Eranthis, who bent his head to kiss it.

Once that hand would have been for Corydalis to kiss. He had courted Myrrhis and won her, back when the world was young, obeyed her and pleasured her and laid all the power of his enchantment at her feet. He had even braved the reek and muck of the world of men, to fetch her the pretty human infants she adored; one of them was kneeling before her now, offering her wine in a crystal glass. Myrrhis took it, sipped, then offered the glass to Eranthis

Oh, Corydalis had never expected her to be entirely faithful. She took human lovers; that was understood. Once there had been a harper, and once a sea captain, and others Corydalis couldn't remember. Their little lives were snuffed out so quickly. But that she should betray him with one of their own kind … Corydalis's fingers flexed to crush the rose, but he stopped himself, fighting to retain an outward calm. He was convinced that the other courtiers were sniggering behind his back; he would not give the fools anything more to gossip about

There was a stir among the courtiers as a servant approached and bowed to the Queen. "She's still there, Highness," he said. "Waiting at the door"

Another tinkle of laughter from Myrrhs. "Sir? How persistent these mortals are!" She stifled a yawn with slim, rose-tipped fingers. "Very well. Open and let her in. It might be amusing to listen to what she has to say."

The servant retreated. Thoughtfully Corydalis watched him go. He had never been sure that any good could come out of dealing with mortals. The Fair Folk had their world, and mortals theirs, and it was best if they did not touch. But this was the fifth night that the woman had been sitting outside the mound, calling out for entrance and sometimes weeping. Queen Myrrhs must be in need of some new distraction to let her in at all, she would never have given the order out of pity. Corydalis allowed himself a small, feline smile. Perhaps she was already growing bored with Eranthis.

Soon the servant returned, bringing the mortal woman with him, a blotch on the pure light and beauty of Faerie. A small woman, her straw gold hair knotted at the back of her head, with a wisp or two framing her face. She wore a brown, homespun gown and on its breast two rowan twigs bound into a cross with red and white thread, a single string of rowan berries hung from it. Powerful protection in the domain of the Fair Folk.

The green lawns of the garden were covered now with rows of cradles, all like the first, stretching into the distance until they seemed to fade into the shadows under the trees.

"Welcome," Myrrhs said from her seat by the fountain. "Come closer. Don't be afraid. Will you take some refreshment after your long vigil?"

The servant was already pouring wine into another of the crystal goblets while the little page approached with a bowl of fruit: ripe cherries and apricots and plums spilling their fragrance into the air. The woman looked at them, swallowed, but shook her head.

"No, lady. I know better than that."

She bobbed a curtsy and stood with her hands folded at her waist. Corydalis had seen mortals enter the mound before this, most of them gawped around, overcome with wonder or greed. This woman showed neither. Though he could see fear in her eyes, she mastered it and remained focused on the Queen.

"Well?" Myrrhs extended one languid hand. "What is it you want of me?"

The woman bobbed another curtsy. "If it please you, Lady, give me my child."

"Your child?" The Queen's eyes widened. "Do we have your child?"

"He vanished from his cradle a se'ennight ago." The woman's voice was growing bolder. "My neighbor said he heard your harness bells ringing that night, and saw the marks of faerie horses in the grass."

Queen Myrrhs exchanged a glance with Eranthis; his eyes sparked with cruel laughter.

"Give her a task to do," he suggested. "Have her spin silk from straw, or make pearls from cherrystones."

The woman barely glanced at him. "I'll thank you not to mock me, sir. You know I can't do that." Beseechingly she held out her hands to the Queen. "Have you no children of your own, lady? Don't you know how much I love mine? How much I miss him?"

Corydalis was growing more interested with every word that was spoken. His gnawing worm of jealousy prompted him to intervene and wipe that smirk off Eranthis's face if he could. He tossed his rose aside and drifted closer.

"And where is the child's father?" Queen Myrrhs asked. "Why does he send you here to plead, instead of coming himself?"

"My man cut himself with a scythe last harvest," the woman replied. "The wound turned bad and he died. He never saw his son." Her voice shook for the first time. "Please, lady, give him back to me! I'll pray for you every night."

Eranthis let out a snigger, and bent his head to whisper in the Queen's ear.

"Our kind have no use for prayers," Myrrhs said. "But perhaps..." She waved a hand toward the rose arbor, and Corydalis saw that a cradle had appeared there, intricately carved from wood and shaded by gauzy hangings looped up with ropes of flowers. "Go and look," the Queen directed.

Joy leaped into the woman's face. "Oh, thank you!" She picked up her skirts and hurried to the cradle, scarcely noticing Corydalis as she passed him.

His curiosity piqued, Corydalis followed her and looked over her shoulder. A baby was sleeping on silken cushions, a baby with rose-petal skin and a soft wisp of golden hair. The woman bent to pick him up, but as she reached down the child awoke. Staring up at her were the hot eyes of a goat.

The woman stifled a scream and took a step back, stumbling into Corydalis. He steadied her with hands on her shoulders. "Be calm," he murmured. "They play a game. Play it with them, and all may yet be well."

She eyed him doubtfully, then straightened up and turned back to the Queen. Her lips were parted to speak, but her words died in a gasp of astonishment. The green lawns of the garden were covered now with rows of cradles, all like the first, stretching into the distance until they seemed to fade into the shadows under the trees.

"Your child is here in the garden," the Queen said. "Choose aright, and you may take him home with you."

The woman hesitated, but at a slight gesture from Corydalis she began to move slowly along the rows, peering into each cradle. In one of them the child's hands and feet were webbed, in another he grinned up at the woman with a full set of teeth filed to points; in another he opened his mouth wide and revealed a spider spinning its web across his throat.

The woman started back, both hands clasped over her mouth. With a massive effort she controlled herself and turned back to the fountain. Queen Myrrhs still sat there, with Eranthis standing at her side and the little page sitting on a cushion at her feet.

"Lady, you're lying to me," the woman said. "My child is not here."

"My kind do not lie," the Queen said coldly. "Your child is in this garden. All you need to do is pick him out."

"If you can," Eranthis added, with a mocking laugh.

The sound of it sent a spurt of fury throbbing through Corydalis. He had heard such laughter too often, from Eranthis and others, since the Queen dismissed him from her bed.

He bent to speak into the woman's ear. "Remember, time does not run here as it runs in the world outside. Be sure you know what you are searching for."

She looked up at him, her confusion gradually fading into understanding. Her eyes shone with a sudden certainty, and in that moment she was beautiful. She spun round and ran between the rows of cradles until she faced the Queen.

"Here is my child," she said, and laid a hand on the page's golden head.

Corydalis felt sharp satisfaction as Eranthis let out a curse and turned away, shoulders hunched in a sulk. Queen Myrrhs's mouth was a thin line, and she turned a venomous look on Corydalis. She knew who had spoiled their game.

"Very well," she said. "Take him and begone."

"What?" The little page sprang to his feet. "She can't be my mother! I don't have to go with her."

"She is, and you do. She won you fairly."

"No!" The boy's mouth gaped in an outraged howl, and he grabbed a fold of the Queen's gown in both fists "She's not my mother! She's ugly .. she's dirty!"

A spasm of pain crossed the woman's face She stretched out a hand to her son "Dickon . . "

"That's not my name " Still clutching the Queen's skirts, the boy tried to hide behind her. "My name is Stachys."

Queen Myrrhis twitched her silks irritably away "Enough of this foolishness She is your mother and you must go with her."

The page's tears spilled over and he began to wail His mother gazed at him helplessly, then at Corydalis "What can I do?"

"The choice is yours," Corydalis replied "If you take him, neither of you can ever come back In time, perhaps, he will forget "

"And if ... if I leave him here, what will happen to him then?"

"He has eaten our food since first he came here. In time, he will become one of us."

The woman gazed round at the garden The enchanted cradles had vanished, leaving smooth grass studded with flowers like jewels. The trees rustled in a warm, scented breeze, their leaves glinting silver Overhead, where she might have expected to see stones, roots and earth, the underside of the mound, was a sky that glowed with a pearly light.

Around her the courtiers watched, like cats waiting to see which way a mouse will run All of them tall, beautiful, silk-clad, with jewels on their hands and at their throats All of them careless in the knowledge of their power

The woman let out a sigh. "What can I give him?" she murmured "Only a few years, fretting for what he's lost. His hands broken on hard labor ... If I take him, he'll always hate me."

"Well?" The Queen's voice was cold "Make your choice "

Corydalis could see the woman's struggle reflected in her face. At last she let out a long sigh "He's not mine anymore Let me kiss him once, and I'll go " The boy was huddled on the rim of the fountain, still sniveling His mother touched her lips to his cheek; he squirmed away, scrubbing at the place with his embroidered sleeve, while she sank into a low curtsy in front of the Queen "Take care of him, please."

Queen Myrrhis's eyes were cold She beckoned to her servant. "Take her away "

As the woman rose to leave, Corydalis stepped forward "Wait " She paused, looking up at him with eyes full of desolation. "My name is Corydalis, mistress," he said "When the boy is older, and can understand, I will tell him about you He can never be yours, but he will learn to honor you "

The woman drew in a breath of wonder "Thank you," she said. "You are kind "

Corydalis bent his head, unsure what more to say.

The Queen's voice cut harshly into the silence between them. "You stupid creature, don't you know who this is?"

The woman turned to her "No."

Queen Myrrhis's laughter was cruel "This is the faerie lord who stole your child."

CORYDALIS WAVED AWAY THE GROOM AND SADDLED HIS OWN horse with hands that shook a little. He thought he would never forget the searing look of shock and betrayal the woman had turned on him before she fled after the servant, out of the realm of the Fair Folk

He had thought he knew what it felt like to be betrayed. Now he recognized that his love for the Queen had been no more than a game, played for the gratification of his senses and his pride. He looked back across endless years and wondered if he had ever felt anything as true as the woman's love for her child.

He mounted his horse and trotted gently to the entrance, the guards pulled open the gates and let him out into the forest. The woman was long gone; the forest was deserted and silent except for the distant cry of a night bird. Corydalis set spurs to his horse, sending it down the forest ride in a flurry of hooves, its mane and tail tossing like captured moonlight At first all he wanted was speed, as if he could leave the hateful memories behind him, but at last he realized that he was taking the same road he had taken once before, when he had stolen the child from its cradle in the farmhouse That last image of the woman was branded on his brain; he knew he could not endure it unless he could see her soften into understanding, forgiveness—and perhaps love

I don't even know her name! How can she do this to me? She has no beauty, no grace and no powers of enchantment to bring a faerie lord to her feet. Corydalis reined in at the end of the lane that led up to the farm, cursing himself for stupidity, half inclined to turn his horse and go back She has courage And she loves her child enough to leave him.

As he followed the lane, twisting back and forth across the hillside, he saw weeds invading the winter wheat, and on the edge of the pasture a broken fence post that would surely let the cows go straying as soon as they discovered it When the farmhouse came in sight he spotted slates missing from the roof, the gate sagged on broken hinges.

Corydalis dismounted and fumbled open the iron latch on the gate with a gloved hand. From somewhere nearby an unseen dog began to bark, as Corydalis pushed open the gate the barking changed to a whimper and then to silence There was a strong smell of pigs

Leaving his horse by the gate, Corydalis crossed the cobbled yard and pounded on the door. There was no response, though he could see lamplight leaking through a shuttered window Corydalis knocked again, this time light footsteps sounded from beyond the door, and the woman spoke, suspicion in her voice "Who is it?"

Corydalis had not realized until then that a woman alone would be reluctant to open her door to a stranger after dark.

"It is I, Lord Corydalis," he replied "Open the door I wish to speak with you."

"Go away "

Corydalis bit back frustration She had cause to refuse him, after all, she couldn't know why he had come

"Please, mistress You know I cannot enter until you give me leave "

A pause. Then the sound of a key being turned in the lock. The door scraped harshly on the flagstones as the woman pulled it open She wore a woolen nightgown with a shawl pulled around her shoulders, her hair was loose and her eyes reddened with weeping

"Well?"

Corydalis held out a hand to her. "Mistress, I've come to say that I'm sorry, and to make amends "

The woman stared at him "Amends? Can you give my child back to me?"

"No. You know that no power on earth can do that Wait," he added hastily, as the woman began to close the door again. "I can give you jewels, silks, velvets . . I can show you the world. Ride with me, and we can see the sun rise over the Indies, and watch it set over the temples of Cathay "

The woman let out a crack of laughter "And who would feed the pigs while I'm gone?"

Corydalis was stunned into silence Like Queen Myrrhis, he had known human lovers, a princess here, a pretty milkmaid there They had swooned at the touch of his hand. He had never been rejected before Especially not with a look of such scorn and contempt.

He bowed his head, reaching for humility, it came hard. "I'll mend your roof and your gate, mistress I'll make your crops grow tall. I'll do whatever you ask "

She was staring at him still, her scorn replaced by confusion. "Why? Because of the child?"

"No ... yes, partly But mostly because of you You are all that is real to me "

The woman's bitter laughter struck him like a blow. "Me? You want me? All the beautiful ladies in your court, and you want a farmer's widow? You're mad "

"I can make you just as beautiful "

The woman took a step forward, over the threshold. Corydalis could have reached her there; instead, he retreated a pace.

"I've no doubt you could." Her voice was soft with fury. "You could do whatever you pleased with me. I know your kind now. You wave your hand and the crops grow tall; wave it again, and they're blighted. You take and give and destroy because you're beautiful and you answer to no one, and because you can. But it's worthless, and I want none of it. Now go away!"

She stepped back into the house and slammed the door behind her.

"Wait—" Corydalis spoke uselessly to the unresponsive oak.

Retreating footsteps faded into silence. A moment later the light behind the shutters was snuffed out. Somewhere overhead an owl hooted.

Defeated, Corydalis turned away, crossed the yard again and mounted his horse. With a wave of his hand—yes, she had been right—he mended the roof and the gate, and on his way down the lane he replaced the broken fence post. He banished the weeds from the wheat field and sent strength to the plants so that the wilting stems grew tall and sturdy.

Though he would never see her again, she would know that he had not lied to her. That he realized the devastation he had made of her life, and done all in his power to show that he was sorry.

It wasn't enough.

At the end of the lane he paused. In one direction lay the mound. In the other lay the village, quiet in the night, the weathercock on the church steeple outlined against the rising moon.

The Queen and Eranthis, his own nagging jealousy for the loss of something he no longer valued, the golden-headed page who would be a living reminder of his own guilt. Endless years of beauty and power and nothingness. Or the world of mortals, and a future Corydalis could scarcely imagine.

He turned his horse toward the village.

At the lych-gate, his horse balked; Corydalis dismounted and left it there. A squirming uneasiness crept all through him as he walked up the path to the church.

The door was closed. Corydalis hammered on it until it opened with a creak. The priest stood there, a small elderly man in a black cassock. Beyond him, candles burned on the altar, shedding a pool of light over the white linen cover. The rest of the church was shrouded in shadow.

The priest's eyes widened as he saw who was standing on his threshold, and he made the sign of the cross.

"Don't be afraid, father." Corydalis's tongue felt thick in his mouth, it was hard to form words. "I mean no harm."

"Then why are you here?"

"I –" Corydalis hesitated. He wasn't sure he could answer the question. Only that he knew he could never go back to the tinseled tedium of the faerie court, and the lighted doorway in front of him seemed to be the only route forward. "I stole a child," he went on. "I wrecked his life, and his mother's. And now I cannot bear it."

"You have come to make confession?" There was astonishment in the priest's voice.

"I want to know how to stop the pain."

"The pain never stops, my son. But it can be mastered. Perhaps even turned to good." The priest stood back and held the door wider. "Come in."

As soon as he set foot over the threshold, Corydalis felt the power. It was in the stones, in the air, in the light and shadow. Surrounded by it, breathing it, he felt his own strength leaching away. The world swung around him and he found himself on his knees.

"What do you truly want, my son?" the priest asked.

"I don't know." In a fury of shame, Corydalis felt his tears start, scalding. "I don't know, but not—not this. Not what I am." He looked up at the priest through shifting, fractured light. "Baptize me."

A flicker of astonishment crossed the priest's face, to be lost in the depth of his calm. "Are you sure? There are tales … it's said that your kind cannot endure the touch of holy things."

Corydalis had heard those tales too, though he had never known any of the faerie who had tried to renounce their immortality. He imagined himself dying in agony, or sifting down into nothingness as the weight of his endless years in the enchanted realm fell on him all at once. Terror howled through him like a gale through the forest, and he could not keep his voice steady. "I'm sure. Do it now."

The priest looked down at him, mild and thoughtful. "I will baptize no one on a mere whim. Do you believe in God, my son?"

Before the woman came, Corydalis would have answered the question with a contemptuous sniff. Before he entered the church, he would not have known what to say. But now, having felt that power, there could be only one answer. "I believe," he said hoarsely.

"And you repent of what you did? You would undo it if you could?"

Corydalis looked back over unnumbered years, of other children lightly snatched away, of mortal lives made plaything for the Faerie Queen. "I would undo all of it."

Without another word the priest retreated and let himself out of the church through another door at the far end. Corydalis struggled to his feet, fearing another rejection, and unsure what to do now.

But in a moment the priest reappeared carrying an earthenware bowl, with a white linen towel over one arm. He set them down on the steps that led up to the altar and beckoned to Corydalis to come and kneel there. Then he spoke the words of baptism.

Corydalis made the responses as he was prompted, braced for agony or dissolution as the priest signed him with the cross and poured the water over his head. There was nothing but the cold shock of the water and perhaps, a very little, the easing of his self-disgust.

When it was over, the priest held out a hand and assisted him to his feet. Corydalis found that he could stand, that he went on breathing, that his body stayed firm and obedient to his will.

"Please, Father," he said. "I must see … Have you a mirror?"

"No, but this will serve." The priest held out the bowl of water he had used for the baptism.

Feeling his breath come faster, Corydalis gazed down at the surface of the water. His own face stared back at him; he still recognized himself, but his timeless beauty was gone. His skin was lined around the eyes and mouth; his face looked drawn and haggard. His hair still curled thickly, but there were flecks of silver in it. He supposed he must be middle-aged, as mortals counted years.

He took a deep breath. "Thank you, Father."

The priest set the water aside. "Do you need a bed for what is left of the night?" he asked. "I can—"

"No, I thank you. There's somewhere I must go … something I must do."

Corydalis left the priest before the altar and made his way down the path from the church. His horse still stood outside the lych-gate. Moonlight glimmered on its flanks, its mane and tail were liquid silver. It stamped one forehoof restively, snorting cloudy breath into the crisp air. As Corydalis reached for the bridle it let out a high-pitched whinny and reared up, both forehooves striking out at the air a handsbreadth from his head. Corydalis started back; one foot slipped and he came down hard in the muck of the street, breaking through the cat-ice that edged the puddles. For a second the faerie horse loomed over him, eyes dark and rolling, then it spun round, its jeweled bridle flying wide and glittering, and was gone.

As its hoofbeats faded, Corydalis pulled himself painfully to his knees, then his feet. Freezing water soaked through his clothes. His cloak was spattered with mud. He gazed blankly at his palms, where beads of dark blood swelled up and split, to mingle with grit and smears of dirt.

Wiping his hands on his cloak, he trudged down the village street until he came to the entrance of the lane and followed it upward until the farm came in sight. The moon was sinking and by the time he reached the yard he had to grope his way through thick darkness. He pushed the gate open, let it click shut behind him, and stumbled across the cobbles until he reached the farmhouse door. There was no response to his knock.

Corydalis sat down on the step, pulling his cloak tightly about him, and leaned back against the doorpost. Waiting at the door, until the woman, out of pity or boredom, would open it and let him in.❧

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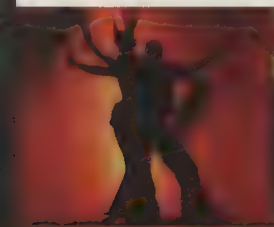

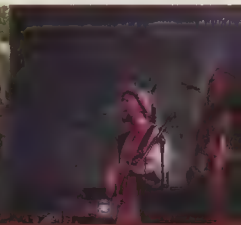

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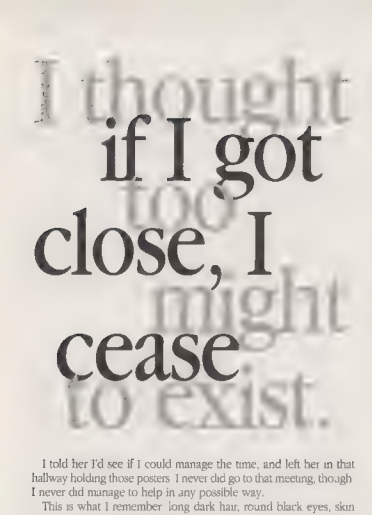
Sometimes love means never having to say you're sorry; other times it means never wanting to say good-bye.

Little Miss Apoca-lypse

BY
CHRISTOPHER BARZAK
ILLUSTRATION BY
CHRIS COCOZZA

EVERY TIME A BELL RINGS, I THINK OF EVE MCCALLISTER We met during our freshman year of college. While I was trying to earn a Business degree, Eve was trying to change the world. You could always find her on campus doing some well-minded sort of activity, passing out brochures for addiction counseling or else flyers for a homeless shelter, organizing clothing drives for the poor. One time I ran across her in a hallway of the Business school, where she was hanging posters, and she flagged me down as I tried to pass her by. "Hey," she said, and I turned back with a bit of apprehension. She fished a flyer out of her back pocket and gave it to me, saying, "You should come to this. We're having a seminar Friday to unionize the campus workers. You're in business law, right?" I stared at the flyer and nodded. "That's great then," she said. "That means you can help."



I told her I'd see if I could manage the time, and left her in that hallway holding those posters I never did go to that meeting, though I never did manage to help in any possible way.

This is what I remember: long dark hair, round black eyes, skin pale as pearls. Paint-spattered jeans, tank tops, silver rings, work boots, a fake fur coat in winter. Every so often she'd drift through the Student Union with a blue feather boa draped around her neck, just to make people look at her. I was more your average college boy, trying to be invisible. Head down, hands in my pockets, wearing clothes that matched the seasons in an attempt to blend.

I saw her at parties sometimes. Usually I'd be in a corner watching everyone else get drunk. Whenever she caught my eye, I'd look down into my cup. She had too much there for me. I thought if I got too close, I might cease to exist. I wasn't stupid. I knew the flame attracted moth always gets singed. So for the first two years of college, I made a success of avoiding her. Then, in our junior year, we met once more unavoidably this time, in the Psychology of Death.

I wasn't up for taking psychology. As a freshman I'd had the general intro course and found most of it common sense. I needed a social science to graduate, though, and the only other option was The Psychology of Marriage. But that inspired in me an even greater cynical response. For my first eighteen years I'd endured living with my parents, who managed to do nothing but argue and cause each other bitterness and regret. Never once did they consider divorce, so I thought if anyone needed that class, it was them.

The Psychology of Death surprised me, though. Doctor Chates, the professor, was a short, stocky man, balding and always wiping sweat from his wrinkled brow. He wore a tiny gray ponytail at the back of his neck, plain-colored t-shirts, and baggy blue jeans. A favorite on campus, he was known for being interested in the lives of students who showed promise or needed guidance. In class, though, he was much different from what I expected. Instead of lecturing, he'd tell us stories about his dead wife.

My favorite story was about how he saw his wife Lena after she died. He knew it wasn't possible, but for months on end he saw her the same time every day, at four o'clock sharp, riding a blue bicycle down Elm Street, past their old Victorian. When she'd come to their driveway, she'd put her feet down on the sidewalk to stop. Then she'd ring the bell on the handlebars twice. He'd watch from the front door whenever he got up the nerve to stand where she could see him. But when she waved, he'd refuse to wave back. After a while, she'd be off again, peddling down the street. "And do you know why all this is so strange?" he asked at the end of his story.

We shook our heads.

"My wife had Multiple Sclerosis. I can't remember ever seeing her on a bike. Not even in our early years."

That was mostly what the class was like those first few weeks of Fall semester. Then we had our first test. It was mostly multiple choice, followed by fill in the blanks with an essay to finish it off. I thought I did fine, but when Doctor Chates handed it back two days later, I'd received a "C". I couldn't remember ever getting lower than a B before that. But there it was, staring at me like a sideways horseshoe. Better luck next time. My breathing grew shallow as I stared at the test. I was caught on the hook of that malicious letter. I wanted to blend, sure, but not like that.

When Doctor Chates began to talk, I looked up to see if anyone else seemed as stricken as I was. Out of those anonymous faces, many smiled, while a few like mine seemed tragic. We were average. Or for some poor souls, less than average. I grew dizzy as I searched those faces for a kindred spirit, paying no attention to Doctor Chates. And then suddenly I saw her staring at me from across the room and almost gasped.

Eve McCallister. She sat near the only window in the room, resting her chin on her hands. She neither smiled nor grimaced, so I couldn't tell what kind of grade she got. I smiled back, trying to be nice, but she didn't acknowledge me, so I looked down at my test again. For the next hour I'd occasionally look over to find her still staring at me, not even taking notes. It unnerved me, so when Doctor Chates released us, I bolted to be first out the door. It didn't matter. As soon as I felt the bitter morning wind brush my face, I heard her call my name.

"Hey, Aidan! Aidan Lockwood!" she shouted. "Wait up!"

I froze, holding the door open for the others, and watched Eve come toward me. "Thanks for waiting," she said, pulling hair away from her face. "I was just wondering if we could get together some time and study," she asked. "This class is going to be a killer. No pun intended."

I must have looked like a man who's been told he has a terminal illness, because Eve laughed and said, "I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?"

I was still reeling from the surprise that she even knew I existed, let alone knew my name, but I managed to get out, "Um, yeah, I could use the help. I got a C on that test. Not a spectacular beginning. You?"

"An A," she said. "But barely. I figure we can help each other out."

I nodded. "We can do that," I said. I couldn't imagine how I, Mr. Average, would be of any help to Eve, but I figured she might be able to get me through the class. We made plans to meet that Sunday at a café called Cedars, just off campus, and before we parted I said, "Hey. How did you know my name?"

"I know a lot of things," Eve said, looking over her shoulder as she walked away. "I can't always help it."

OUR FIRST MEETING THAT SUNDAY STARTED OUT HIGHLY studious. When we spread our books on the table, I immediately noticed her notes. They were detailed and her handwriting was narrow and straight. Mine were written in a loopy cursive, in a code only I understood. Sometimes, though, even I couldn't make out what I'd written. I found a cryptic message scrawled in my spidery hand that said, "Death is wish fulfillment. See pg. 110." But as I flipped through the book to find a passage on procedures for unconscious patients, nothing so much as a hint of wish fulfillment could be found.

"You're a business major, for Christ's sake," said Eve. "How do you plan on ever running a company?"

I shrugged. "I haven't thought that far ahead, I guess."

"Apparently," she laughed. "I think you'd better copy my notes."

While I sipped beer, Eve held forth on the psychology of death. In her hands, the mysterious anecdotes Doctor Chutes told about his undead wife became obvious and understandable. "This line here. This bit about wish fulfillment," she said. "It's that story he told us. The one where Lena rides past on a bike? He's talking about wish fulfillment. His seeing her after she's died filled a gap in his psyche. Think of Kubler-Ross's stages of grief. He was in denial."

"Oh?" I said, the concepts suddenly clicking into place. "You mean he saw her because he wanted to? It was a delusion?"

"Right," said Eve. "Well, sort of. That's what the psychologists call it. But that's not all. Doctor Chutes didn't say this, but it was wish fulfillment on Lena's part too."

"How?"

"Lena was filling a gap also," said Eve. "She missed him too. He was as dead to her as she was to him, so she tried to find ways to see him. Wherever Lena was, she probably dreamed of riding a blue bike past her old house so she could see her husband. I imagine she was depressed as you can get."

"But that would mean you believe in ghosts."

"Of course," said Eve. "Why wouldn't I?"

I blinked, stunned to know she held such beliefs. I expected someone as smart as her to be more of a rational type. This way of thinking made her more attractive though. I didn't argue. I only listened. And when our studies turned into more drinking and storytelling, I invited her back to my place. I worried she'd think I was being too pushy, but she quickly downed her beer and said, "Sure. Let's go."

I LIVED A FEW BLOCKS FROM CAMPUS IN THE ATTIC APARTMENT of a rambling Victorian. Across the street was a late nineteenth-century Midwestern mansion: stone-walled, three stories tall, it had gables and cupolas, the works. Men and women lingered on the porch of that house wearing sweatpants and robes, smoking cigarettes, staring up and down the street at all hours of the night. When I first moved in, my downstairs neighbor told me it was a house for people who'd had mental breakdowns. "They're heavily sedated," he said, "so don't worry. They're harmless." He hadn't convinced me, but within days I understood what he'd meant. The looks on their faces: their mouths drooping, eyes sunken and hollow, staring ahead at nothing. They were too far gone to be anything but zombies.

I never talked to the sidewalk zombies, but they charmed Eve. As we walked past the mansion, an old white guy asked her for fifty cents, another offered her a cigarette, and a black woman wearing a pink ballerina tutu laughed behind her hand at us. Eve gave fifty cents to the old man and he ran into the mansion as if on a mission. She took the smoke from the other guy and let him light it, the flame gold-leafing her cheeks. When she smiled back at the tutu-wearing woman, as if they shared a secret, the woman burst into laughter. Eve laughed, too, as if all this were normal. I was confused, but oddly impressed. On our way up to my apartment, I commented on how good she'd been with them. She shrugged. "They're just people, Aidan. People whose worlds have been shattered, sure. But people nonetheless."

When we reached my attic, Eve went from room to room, assessing the place as if she were considering renting. "Your apartment is cute," was her final pronouncement. "Tiny, like for a hobbit. But you're not small."

She stood in the doorway of my bedroom. I blushed and started to mumble something, but before I could figure out what to say, she grabbed my hand and pulled me into my room.

I was nervous, but the same facility she had in helping me understand the psychology of death she had in helping me take off our clothes. First her shirt up and over her head, then her pants down in a pool at her feet. She kissed the knuckles of my hands, looking up each time her lips met my skin. And when she began to kiss her way down my chest and stomach, she looked up to say, "It's all right, Aidan. All we have is now."

"Now?" I said, smiling. "What about tomorrow?"

She considered this for a moment, then nodded. "Tomorrow, too," she said. "But after that, who knows? The world could end. A plane could crash into this attic. You could step off a curb and get hit by a bus."

"All fair speculations," I said. "But pretty bleak, don't you think?"

"Only if you're not me," said Eve. "If you were me, it'd make sense."

ANYMORE, I'M NOT SURE HOW IT HAPPENED. WHEN I LOOK back at how I'd avoided her, and then for one study date to lead to sex and, before the week was up, moving in together—it's all still beyond the scope of reason. All I know is when she kissed me, my heart beat harder. And when she held me close, I wanted to be closer. I wanted to be both myself and her as well, to be one of the creatures from Plato's origin of love, which Eve told me about one night after we lay among my twisted sheets, exhausted.

"Humans used to share one body," she said. "Their backs met, and they looked out at the world in a perfect circle. Some were two men, some two women, some a man and a woman. And when they pissed off the gods, the gods split them in half. That's what started all of this love business, so now we're constantly trying to find our other half, the one who ran away after being torn apart."

"What a happy ending," I said.

"Well not everything ends happily, Aidan."

"True," I said. Then, mocking her a little, I said, "You should have a letters column in the campus newspaper. Students could write in with problems. You could predict the inevitable bad outcome. Words of wisdom from our very own Little Miss Apocalypse."

"Very funny," said Eve. "But seriously, Aidan. The world doesn't always provide a happy ending."

"I know," I said. "Believe me. I have parents."

My apartment was small, but we didn't mind sharing. After a few weeks of her staying night after night, I cleared shelf space for her books and pushed my clothes down the rod in the closet. Eve decorated the place with pictures she cut out of *National Geographic*. I asked why all the multiculturalism and she said she felt better with a lot of people around. "This one here," she said, pointing to an old Indian man sitting in front of a stone building, smoking a pipe. "He's seen an awful lot. He looks wise, don't you think?"

I grinned, endeared by her ability to surprise me with her personality. With Eve I was always finding something out. The more she revealed, the more I wanted. And right then I couldn't imagine ever wanting that feeling to stop.

In the morning, we'd walk to campus together and she'd give me a kiss before leaving me at the front of the Business school. I'd watch her walk away, toward the school of Arts and Sciences, and as I watched her disappear behind the hill in the center of campus, I'd grow afraid that we'd done all this before. That at some other time when we were other people, I'd watched her walk away after the gods tore us apart.

I GOT A B ON THE NEXT TEST WHEN DOCTOR CHUTES handed it to me he said, "Good work, Aidan," and smiled. That day I was one of the kids with the face that didn't expect his own good fortune. Anyone looking would have known I hadn't done as well the first time. I looked at Eve, who sat next to me now. She gave me a thumbs up as she waited for her paper. When Doctor Chutes

handed it over, she didn't look at it, just put it in her backpack as if her grade didn't matter at all

After class, we went to Cedars, which had become our regular hangout. Eve asked how I did and I said, "I got a B!" and kissed her cheek

"See?" she said. "I told you this stuff isn't hard." She smiled, but her face started to close as if she were retreating.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's just ... It's my father."

We rarely spoke of our families. I knew Eve's mother had died when Eve was fifteen and that her father, a carpenter here in Youngstown, had raised her. I knew they never talked. Other than that, Eve hadn't elaborated. I assumed they'd had trouble between them and left the subject alone, waiting for her to tell me what she wanted when she wanted. "What about him?" I asked.

"He's in the hospital. The secretary in the English department told me this morning."

"The secretary in the English department?"

"The hospital called and left the message there. I was an English major last time he and I spoke. He must have told them to call there. He doesn't know I've switched to Psych."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's dying."

"Of what?"

"Cancer of something. They're all the same to me," said Eve.

"What are you going to do?"

"I have to see him," she said. "I'm going to St. Elizabeth's today. I was wondering if you'd go with me."

I wasn't sure if I was prepared to throw myself into Eve's family drama, but I decided I should take the chance. So I took her hands in mine then and said, "You know I will."

WHILE EVE TALKED TO HER FATHER, I WAITED IN THE HALLWAY, watching the hospital staff caught in their duties. Nurses strolled past, carrying files, pushing carts, catching doctors up on the status of patients. I hadn't been in a hospital for years, not since high school when I'd had mono. Being there reminded me of how good it was not to have to endure strange beds, blinding fluorescent lights, and white rooms with floral borders. I preferred Eve's pictures of people from around the world instead.

I could hear Eve's voice, muffled in the distance, but I couldn't hear her father. I wondered what sort of man he was, and why they didn't talk. I wondered if they were reconciling. I'd seen grudges held for years, but I'd always thought that was a problem specific to my family. My mom and dad were capable of being icy to one another for months and months. But surely, I thought, Eve and her father would work things out before it was too late.

I'd been waiting outside for half an hour when suddenly I heard Eve start to shout. I was slumped against the wall, but immediately I sprang up like a guard dog and turned the corner.

I found her in tears, pointing a finger at her father. "You stupid motherfucker!" she shouted. Then she grabbed a pitcher of water and pulled her arm back to throw, but I managed to take hold of her before a nurse ran in asking what was the matter. "Just a little argument," I said, trying to make light of the situation, but the nurse furrowed his brow.

I looked at Eve's father for the first time since entering. His eyes were closed, his breathing raspy, his face folded with age and pain. He was unconscious, full of painkillers, in no shape to have caused any possible harm. "Eve," I said. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Oh you too, huh?" she said, pulling her arm away. "Forget it. I'm out of here. And forget you too," she said to her father as she left.

I caught up with her in the lobby. Grabbing hold of her arm, I escorted her out like a security guard. She didn't look at me, just leaned against me, allowing me to guide her to the car. When she was settled, I started the car and pulled us into traffic. A few minutes later I asked, "What happened back there?"

"You wouldn't understand," she said. "It's not something I can just explain. Besides, you wouldn't believe me."

"I'm listening."

"Well," she said, "if you really want to know, I'll tell you. But don't say I didn't warn you."

Over the next fifteen minutes, while I drove back to our apartment, Eve told me things that—she was right—I couldn't believe. She had some sort of supernatural ability. That's the closest approximation she could come to, she said. She could see death around dying people. She sometimes knew the way people would die. She could talk to ghosts and people whose spirits were trying to leave their bodies. "Who?" I asked. "Which people?"

"I can't figure that out. I have no control over it. Sometimes I see, sometimes I don't. He was there tonight, though. He's a bit lost and confused, doesn't know how to leave yet. But he was still as horrible to me as ever, for being like her. My mother was able to do it, too. It's what finally came between them."

"How?"

"She couldn't stand it after a while. All she saw was how people would die. Do you know how that feels, Aidan? Do you understand how it is to look at someone you love and see their ending? She took sleeping pills in order to rest. One day she took the whole bottle. My father never forgave her. He started drinking, and when I started seeing things too, he got upset. He beat me up one night. I went to my grandma's then. I lived with her until I was eighteen. Then I came to school. We've barely spoken since the night he hit me, since I left."

The whole time she spoke, she looked out her window. When she

"After that first test, I thought you'd be one of the ghosts."

finished, she didn't turn to see my reaction. "I don't know what to say," I said.

She shrugged. "Don't worry. I wouldn't know what to say either. But thanks for not calling me a liar. I appreciate that."

WE NEVER TALKED ABOUT WHAT SHE'D CONFESSED. I WASN'T comfortable with her admission and she wasn't comfortable with my discomfort, so we took steps away from each other and allowed the new space to take the edge off. We continued our classes, although Eve missed several days due to calls from the hospital, asking her to be there whenever it looked like her father would die. He didn't die, though. He lingered. And as he lingered, autumn passed into winter.

I had a high B in the Psychology of Death at that point. On the midterm I scored a low A, and at conference time, when I knocked on the door of his office, Doctor Chutes looked up from his computer with a smile and patted his hand on the chair beside his desk. "Come in, Aidan," he said.

We settled in to talking about my progress, which had made an impression on him. "A good one," he said. "After that first test, I thought you'd be one of the ghosts."

"Ghosts?" I asked, furrowing my eyebrows.

"Sorry," said Doctor Chutes. "Department terminology. Ghosts: Students who drift through, say nothing, barely pass, go on to the next class without making any impression. There are far too many ghosts on campus, Aidan. I'm glad to see you aren't one of them."

I thanked him. "I have to admit, though," I said, "it's mainly because I've been studying with Eve McCallister."

He nodded, but his joviality dimmed, replaced by a look of grave consideration. "Yes, Ms. McCallister. She was here this morning for her conference, so I know now why she's missed a few days. It's never easy when a parent is ill."

"She's keeping her chin up," I said. "We're keeping it up together."

"Yes," said Doctor Chutes. "I've heard about this. The two of you have become friends?" His smile returned and I was happy to see the grim aura gone again.

"We're living together," I said, suddenly wanting someone of my own to whom I could confess. "I've never met anyone like her. She's amazing."

Doctor Chutes nodded. "That's a wonderful feeling," he said. "Hold on to it. You never know when it will go away. But promise me something else, too."

"What's that?"

"Be careful with her. Eve is brilliant, Aidan. I've had her in two other courses. I haven't encountered a student of her intelligence in the last ten years. But she's also fragile. It's a difficult thing looking out at the world with the sort of mind she has. It weighs on a person. I'm happy to know she has you to help."

"But she's always had lots of people around her."

"Oh see," said Doctor Chutes. "That's where you're wrong. Eve has always had her hand in one thing or another on campus, yes. But none of those people have reached her like you have. She's a different person than last spring when I had her in Social Psychology. Tougher. And she needs to be tough to deal with her illness."

"Illness?" I was afraid Doctor Chutes knew what Eve had admitted to me the previous month. I realized then that I was embarrassed by what she'd told me, but I also leaped to defend her. "That's not really an illness," I said.

"Well, what else would you call it? Bipolar disorder is a very real illness and shouldn't be taken lightly. And Eve is already doing herself a disservice by going without medication. She doesn't believe the diagnosis is correct. For all of her problems, though, she seems to be doing well. I think that has something to do with you."

I blinked, not saying anything for a while. Then finally I said, "Eve's bipolar?" and Doctor Chutes looked puzzled as well.

"You mean she hasn't told you?"

"No. She's told me things. Lots of things. But she's never mentioned this."

"Oh dear," he said. "Oh, I've made a horrible assumption. Please, Aidan, allow her to tell you herself. Otherwise she'll feel betrayed. I honestly thought she'd told you. She said that she had."

"She never told me that."

"Please be careful with her. She's a good girl," said Dr. Chutes. And suddenly I felt more responsible for someone than I'd ever thought possible.

"Don't worry," I told Dr. Chutes. "I won't say anything. I'll take care of her."

I HADN'T REALIZED EVE AND DOCTOR CHUTES WERE SO CLOSE. He'd seemed almost fatherly when he had talked about her. And it made sense, once I thought about it. Eve had problems with her father, so why wouldn't she seek out a substitute, one who could understand her difficulties? Doctor Chutes, too, was alone in the world. His wife gone and no children. It was a perfect match.

I didn't tell Eve about our discussion. Instead I tried my best to keep my promise to Doctor Chutes. While Eve visited her father in the hospital, I cleaned house, did the dishes, washed laundry, took out garbage, made the bed. On days she missed class, I took perfect notes. I printed them instead of writing in my spidery cursive. I delivered them to her with a kiss.

"Thank you for being so good to me," she said one night near the end of the semester. "I don't know how I'd get through this without you. I'm not very good at keeping myself together sometimes."

"It's no problem," I said. "I like helping."

We were in the kitchen. I was searching the refrigerator for something edible, Eve was leaning against the sink. "I'll do the dishes tonight," she said. "I'm not going to see Dad."

Eve filled the sink with hot water. I couldn't help thinking about how we moved around each other like a married couple now. It was strange, but only because it was the first time I'd noticed. It felt good, though. I liked taking care of her. I liked that feeling being reciprocated. I'd never fallen for someone where I looked forward to seeing them before I went to sleep and when I woke. But here it was: the real deal. I'd managed to tell my mom on the phone one night, "Who would have known it could be something nice?" and she'd gotten a bit teary, though I'm not sure if her tears were from joy or guilt. I'd only seen her and my father's version of a relationship, which amounted to twenty-five years of frustration and arguments. This, though, made me reconsider.

I drifted into the living room to turn on the TV, but before I grabbed the remote I heard glass shatter and Eve shouting, "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

I ran back to the kitchen to find a drinking glass in shards on the floor and Eve clenching her hand tight. Blood poured out of a slice between her fingers, running in rivulets down her knuckles. "What happened?" I asked.

She shook her head. "We have to get to the hospital," she said.

"Is the cut that bad?" I asked, trying to get her to show me.

"No," said Eve. "It's my father. It's happening. He's dying."

I dropped Eve off at the front of the hospital, then parked the car. Her father had been near to dying for the past month and gave no sign of giving up the ghost, so I expected this to be just another close call. But by the time I made it up to his room, he'd gone and died just like Eve had predicted.

She stood by his bed, holding his hand. With her other hand she wiped his forehead, then leaned down and gently pressed her lips against his brow. "It's okay, Daddy," she whispered. "Everything is going to be all right."

EVE TOOK INCOMPLETES THAT SEMESTER SHE SAID SHE'D make the work up over winter break and I said, "Do what you need. Don't worry."

I continued classes, though, finishing the Psychology of Death with an A. Doctor Chutes gave us one more Lena story on our last day. He told us how he'd had one more encounter with Lena. She came once more on her blue bike, stopped in front of the house, rang the bell and waved. But this time, instead of ignoring her, Doctor Chutes lifted his arm and waved. "I'd never seen such a smile," he told us, lowering his hand again. "Never such happiness on that woman's face."

I told Eve that story later and she nodded. "That was good of him to let her go," she said.

"What do you mean?" I said. "She was the one who kept visiting. Aren't you the one who said she missed him just as much?"

"She did, yes," said Eve. "That's why she was coming around initially. But she also needed his goodbye. He wasn't giving it to her. Then he did. That's why she was happy."

"I don't know about that," I said, "but I got an A."

"That's because you're brilliant," Eve said, rolling over in bed to kiss me. Then that kiss swept us up into a whirlwind, landing us in a tangle of sheets. "Aidan," she said, at the completely wrong moment, "when I need it, will you give me your goodbye?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's dark out," said Eve. "I don't see it going away soon. I'm trying, but it won't."

"What do you mean?" I asked again.

"Make the dark go away, Aidan." Eve said. "Make everything bright."

WE MADE THE DARK GO AWAY THAT NIGHT BUT WERE UNABLE to hold it off forever. Christmas came and went, and when it was time to return to school, Eve still hadn't done any work to make up her incompletes. When I asked what she'd do about it, she said, "I'm not going back."

"You mean this semester," I said. "You mean you're taking a semester off?"

"No," she said. "I'm done, Aidan. No more school. It's over."

"You can't just quit," I said. "You're too smart." I told her what Doctor Chutes had said about her during my conference, how brilliant she was, and although hearing how much he and I thought of her elicited a smile, it was brief and weak.

"I've decided, Aidan," she said. "So don't try to talk me out of it."

I didn't say any more. I sighed, defeated.

"Also," said Eve, a little reluctant. "I've decided to move into my dad's house."

I was stunned. I stood there with my hands on my hips and could only manage asking, "What does that mean?"

"It means I need us to be over too," said Eve. She came to me then and took my hand, kissed the knuckles like she did that first night, one after the other. "It means I'm going home."

TWO DAYS LATER SHE WAS GONE. HER BOOKS. EMPTY SPACES on my shelves. Half the closet bare. I didn't know what to do, how to understand what was happening. I didn't know if I had a right to feel anything period. After all, her father had died. And on top of that she had a disorder that probably made this even more difficult. Wouldn't it have been selfish to bring up my own feelings? She needed to leave and all I could do was say I'd wait. To call when she was ready.

But she didn't call. Not once.

I drove past her father's house sometimes—after classes or in the middle of the night—wanting to catch a glimpse of her as she passed by her window, or maybe as she was leaving, but I never saw her. And the few times I called or got the nerve up to knock on her door, she never answered. She had disappeared as if she'd never existed, as if she'd been some dream I'd had, or maybe some nightmare.

I came home from those expeditions to find the sidewalk zombies from the mansion across the street waiting as usual, asking for fifty cents, a kind word, a smile. But I couldn't manage to give them anything. Not even a hello.

It wasn't until the end of Spring semester that I finally heard from her again. I'd given up on the possibility by then. Four months of nothing, then one night I got drunk after my classes and staggered home from the pub, crying at the way the stars winked at me and how the cracks in the sidewalk seemed to grow larger the longer I looked at them. Everything that night had a reason for sorrow hiding behind its seemingly normal face. A cloud broke apart as it passed over the moon, and in that moment I received a vision, a tapestry of images: me and Eve at Cedars drinking beer and laughing, telling each other stories, me and Eve studying, taking walks in the park, me and Eve making love. All of it gone in a moment, the tapestry of our life together torn to shreds.

Inconsolable, I trudged up the stairs to my apartment and threw myself on my bed. I expected to pass out, but instead the phone started ringing. When I picked up, it was her. "Aidan," she said. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Come back," I said. "You can't leave me like this. I love you."

"I love you, too," she said. "But believe me, this is for the best. Honest. I wouldn't hurt you."

Her voice sounded raspy. I couldn't understand why, so I asked, "What's happened to your voice?"

"Nothing," she said. "Don't worry about me. Let's worry about you."

"I love you," I said again. In one instant I had turned into a stereotypical drunk. "Eve," I pleaded. "Please. Come back."

"If I came back," she said, "it would only make things worse. I love you, Aidan. But trust me. It has to be this way. It's not good right now. I'm not myself anymore."

"Oh fine!" I shouted. "Whatever you say! Eve knows best! Eve is brilliant! No one smarter has passed through this campus in the past ten years, so I should just listen to whatever you say, right?"

"Aidan, stop. You're not making this easier."

"Why should I? So you don't have to feel bad for leaving?"

"Something bad is about to happen, Aidan. You're going to have to be strong. You have to stop thinking about me and start thinking about yourself."

"You mean like you're doing? It's always about you, isn't it, Eve? Little Miss Apocalypse," I said, sighing. "Why does everything with you have to be a catastrophe? Your father died. It doesn't mean everything has to fall apart."

"This isn't about my father, Aidan. It's something else. This thing. This thing that's going to happen is tearing me up and I don't want it to affect you."

"Fuck off," I said. "That's just another excuse for not dealing with your life."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your disorder!"

"Who told you about that?" Before I could answer, though, Eve said, "It doesn't matter. I'm not like him. I'm not going to fight like this. It's not true. That's just what they call it. They don't understand, that's all."

"Who?"

"The doctors! For Christ's sake, Aidan. You know they give all sorts of names to things they don't understand then call it a disorder. So I see people dying before it happens. That's not crazy! It's something else and they don't want to deal with it.

"Right," I said, gearing up to deliver another blast of ignorance. But again, before I managed to make the situation worse, Eve interrupted.

"I love you, Aidan."

"Don't do this," I pleaded.

But she hung up.

THE NEXT MORNING I WOKE WITH A HANGOVER SO BIG IT made me wish I hadn't entertained the idea that getting drunk would help me drown my feelings. I stumbled into the bathroom for aspirin, vaguely recalling the conversation, wondering if I'd dreamed it. But when I looked at the caller ID on the phone, there was her name and number.

At school I picked up a copy of the campus newspaper, reading through articles the journalism students had cobbled together on whether or not the university should be responsible for health care benefits of the cafeteria workers. Eve had given up that cause soon after moving into my place. When I found my way to the back of the paper, an article titled "Former Student Commits Suicide" caught my eye. I scanned the first sentence and came to a stop when the writer provided the student's name.

It was Eve, my Eve, the article referred to. She had killed herself three days earlier. She'd taken pills and gone to sleep.

I'm not sure how long I stood there holding that paper, unable to comprehend immediately the fact that just several hours previous I had spoken to a ghost, but the day lengthened and shadows grew around me. And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't understand what had happened. One sentence and suddenly nothing made sense.

I sat on a bench outside the Arts and Sciences building, trying to catch my breath. No matter how I gasped, though, I couldn't breathe. I began to think I would suffocate. Then another student found me, had me lay down on the bench, and asked if I needed a doctor. "No," I said. "Just give me a moment." With someone else nearby, I felt grounded. The world still existed, even though she was no longer in it.

I DIDN'T GO TO THE FUNERAL. I DIDN'T GO TO TALK TO Doctor Chutes. He called to find out if I'd heard the news, to ask if I was okay, but I let the voicemail take his message. I didn't want him telling me what I'd have to do to get through this. And by then I'd realized something that made me even angrier with Eve. She'd done the same thing as her mother. And like her father—like Eve when she was a little girl—I was left trying to make sense of a senseless mess. I hated her for leaving, and I hated her for making sure I wouldn't forget.

I stayed in bed for days and ignored the phone, until my landlord let my parents in. They had come to take me home. "You need your family," said my mother. She hadn't known Eve except for little things I'd mentioned during our infrequent phone conversations, but I loved her and my dad right then, for knowing what not to say. Their years of bickering disappeared. Suddenly I was their kid again and they had to take care of me. Whatever their problems were, they put them aside.

I stayed in the bed I slept in as I grew up, and my mother brought me food in on a tray. She tried to get me to talk, but I wouldn't. "Honey," she said, "it doesn't help to hold it all inside."

But if I let it out, I thought, it will all go away.

I returned to classes a week later, but nothing seemed to matter. The professor's voices droned in my ears like wasps. The sidewalks rolled beneath my feet like a conveyor belt. When I finally ran into Doctor Chutes, literally bumping into him as I walked with my head down, I couldn't manage to speak to him like I used to. "Aidan," he said, "why don't we have lunch? I think we should talk."

I said I couldn't, I said I had a class to get to, I said I'd call him and that we'd get together soon. He pursed his lips, unsatisfied with my evasion, but he let me go.

I walked back to my apartment, oblivious to my surroundings as usual, until I came upon the sidewalk zombies roaming the street in front of the mansion. They left me alone, not asking for anything, as if they somehow sensed my sadness that day. I appreciated that so much that I nearly initiated a conversation myself. They would understand what had happened, I thought. I could tell the old guys about what had happened to me. I could take the tutu-wearing woman in my arms and we could maybe cry together. In the end, though, I shook my head and turned my back on them, crossing the street.

I was on the front porch, key in the door, when I heard the whir of wheels, the scrape of brakes, and the thud of her feet on the

One sentence and suddenly nothing made sense.

asphalt behind me. At first I thought it was only the sidewalk zombies shambling across the street. But then she clinged the bell on her bike and shouted, "Hey Aidan! Aidan Lockwood! Wait up!" and immediately I recognized her voice.

I froze for a second, almost turning around to see her once again. To see that face, those lips, to see everything that had embodied my happiness for one more brief moment. It was so like her to show up in someone else's story. First taking the same exit as her mother, then this: showing up on Lena's bike. She probably thought it was cute, and I admit, something about that almost endeared her to me all over again.

Then I did what I've been doing ever since, every time I hear that bell ring out. I turned around and looked. There she was, smiling, her hand up in the air, waving, waiting for me to lift my hand up to her as well. But God help me, no matter how much giving her my goodbye is the thing anyone deserves, I still don't want to give her up.

When she rings that bell and waves at me, silently urging me toward our end, I only smile and think of our beginning and, like that first day she came around, close the door behind me, knowing she'll be back. ❧

>> Electricity

>> Printing presses

>> Almanacs

>> Diplomacy

>> Bifocals

A Trade in Serpents

The Pennsylvania Gazette, May 9, 1751

Simon danced, kicking at the rattler's tail until he could get a clear shot. Finny stamped and missed, the snake thrashing all the while, then Simon lunged in and ground its malevolent triangular head beneath his heavy boot, shouting "Hah! Hah!"—not laughter, but a demented war cry to hide his fear

The dead snake lay like rope Simon continued to eviscerate it, stomping its powerful body, its reptile blood smudging those bright diamond markings. "Enough " said Finny "Simon! If we delay, other snakes may come

Bastards!" shouted Simon "Let them come! Let them.

Finny shoved the carcass into the gutter with his boot, but Simon seized up the snake and carried it to the coffeehouse in his bare hands He spat on it and whipped it tail-first into the walls to shatter its rattle, punishing it even beyond death with a victor's righteousness

Finny did not chastise Simon further. His son was fourteen years old, in the full blaze of youth, and this had been his first battle "Good job," said Finny belatedly "Well done " But Simon's bloodlust unsettled him, and he was glad to reach the door of the coffeehouse with no further incident

MALBON'S COFFEEHOUSE GRACED THE CORNER OF BOW Street and Russell Street, just past the darkened stalls of Covent Garden Nearby were the cheaper haunts of the tradesmen, but Malbon's was a cut above—a popular haven for brokers and politicians, wits, and men of letters

In happier times a roar of conversation would have greeted Finny and Simon when they opened the door This afternoon Malbon's was empty And instead of the familiar *dame de comptoir,* Tom Malbon himself sat behind the counter, gloomily paging through the *Daily Courant*

This was Simon's inaugural visit to Malbon's, yet he strode in with confidence. "See what we will endure for a pot of your most excellent coffee!" he cried grandly, and tossed the bloody snake onto the long wooden-topped serving table Finny winced

"Finny my-Lord," said Tom in amused greeting "The pup yours?"

"My son, Simon Please forgive his exuberance "

"Gladly, if it brings me custom."

Finny ordered two dishes of Turkish Fine at one and a half pence apiece, and the proprietor placed the pot on the stove As the aroma of the coffee blended into the comfortable smells of mahogany, fire-smoke, and old tobacco, Finny's tenseness began to abate

Simon propped open the snake's mouth with a spoon, and he and Tom discussed the beast's hollow fangs, only one of which had been broken by Simon's boot The rattle was smashed to pieces, but Simon did his uncanny imitation of the dry chatter it had made when whole Tom laughed; Finny shuddered To his quiet relief, once the coffee was served the rattlesnake was removed to the fire

"They say you can eat the meat," said Tom, "but I know of none with the stomach to put it to the test "

Simon laughed edgily "I'd cram one down Franklin's throat, perhaps And another, till the man was quite full."

Finny took a gulp of the too-hot coffee "Simon, let us not .. Let us behave as gentlemen "

Simon turned to him, bright with excitement Finny held his breath, wondering if his son was set to betray him. But Simon merely winked and said, "I apologize. Father," and the conversation shifted to lighter matters

But Tom Malbon was a sharp man and well knew of Finny's Parliamentary connections, and Finny wondered how much more it would take for Tom to add two and two, and once he guessed their secret, what he might do with that knowledge

these venomous Reptiles we call RATTLE SNAKES, Felons-convict from the Beginning of the World .. some Thousands might be collected annually, and transported to Britain. There I would propose to have them carefully distributed in St James's Park, in the Spring-Gardens and other Places of Pleasure about London, in the Gardens of all the Nobility and Gentry throughout the Nation ..."

Benjamin Franklin, ibid.

"I have often been called a man of potent dreams," said Franklin complacently, thumbs hooked into his waistcoat pockets. "And aye, many of my best dreams come true But these are directed toward the advantage of mankind, and come about through my own industry, and the toil of those whom I manage, in my modest way, to influence."

Ben Franklin did not have the air of a sorcerer Broad-shouldered and thickening, balding and tending toward jowls, Franklin looked just like what he was a newspaper editor and junior provincial politician. Moreover, his britches, stockings, and crisply buckled shoes made a relic of him, British fashions having recently lurched in the direction of tough dark leathers and heavy fabrics worn like armor

The man's only uncanny aspect was his ability to talk about himself without cease. Interrogating Franklin made Finny's head throb, and their current session was well into its fourth hour The two soldiers in the corner of the drawing room sat brain-numbed and slack-mouthed

Finny pressed on. "And none of your previous dreams, nor your writings or predictions, nor any other of your pronouncements have come to pass in any unnatural fashion?"

"Never!" said Franklin "Not in my lifetime have I seen an event that natural science might not readily explain However, since we're covering familiar ground, let me repeat that I wrote my rattlesnake polemic in a most unusual frame of mind As I composed my tirade against your government's policy of transportation, and of life tens of thousands of convicted murderers, rapists, and thieves forced upon our young land these past years, brigands who then continue their loathsome careers upon our shores—as I crafted my prose I was moved to such a state of fury that I dared not even blot my writing, lest I smear the ink A thunderstorm crashing in the skies overhead found its echo in my soul. I was in such torment that my heart must explode—yet it did not. Exploded onto the paper, rather

"And, aye, I surely used the organ of the press to curse my Mother Country, and indeed I wished serpents upon it—as a grim satire, a carefully chosen analogy to drive home my message Only to learn several months later, to my horror and confusion, that my curse had become true

"Since then I have, as you know, recanted, and in print, but to no avail "

Finny suppressed a shudder. The rattlesnakes had welled up from grates and gutters, from flowerbeds and basements, and while they were chiefly drawn to the nobility, the common folk were not spared. By midsummer the death toll from snakebite in London had outpaced any other cause

The confusion had not been Franklin's alone. None in England could guess the cause of the scourge Eventually, news of the infestation reached the Americas, and certain information percolated back in the reverse direction, and the chain of events at last became apparent But by the time British troops came to call at "Americanus's"

"You came to gloat, to see for yourself what your magnificent but mysterious powers had wrought. To satisfy your curiosity and confirm your measure of your own importance."

house in Sassafras Street in Philadelphia, Franklin had fled

Winter brought a temporary respite, but when the spring thaw came the rattlesnakes and their new young again assaulted the streets of London, spreading out across the Cotswolds and the Fens into other cities Transportation to the Americas had been discontinued, but it made no difference. Once activated, the daggers of vengeance were apparently impossible to reshe.athe.

Franklin was still in full spate Finny forced himself to concentrate

Satire, aye, yet I felt neither wit nor subtlety in its devising, urged on as I was by the sure and steady presence of the Americans wronged, the Americans dead."

Franklin raised his hand to his cheek in a way Finny thought rather affected "I speak metaphorically But perhaps even then I knew I had brought about something extraordinary. Perhaps I felt a fore shadowing of the power I had unleashed.

"I believed that Providence drove my pen. Now, of course, I'm not so sure But—please understand—I have always been the King's loyal subject. I have always loved Britannia, and have never sought to bring her harm."

"Indeed?" said Finny, at last getting a word in edgewise, and investing it with a healthy dose of irony.

Franklin smiled. "Remember, I traveled here at my own expense and yielded myself up to your government of my own free will. I came to lend whatever assistance I may, sir, as you must surely realize."

Another surge of sick pain in Finny's forehead. He rose and placed his hands flat on the table that separated him from Franklin, looming over the American. "Sir, I do not. As a matter of fact, I believe the opposite to be true. you came to gloat. to see for yourself what your magnificent but mysterious powers had wrought. To satisfy your curiosity and confirm your measure of your own importance Do you deny it?"

"Certainly," said Franklin smoothly "You ascribe to me a motivation I cannot even comprehend."

Finny narrowed his eyes "Let us be candid, Mr. Franklin. You could never have escaped us. British troops stormed your house scant days after you decamped We arrested your wife and your children and interrogated them most thoroughly We detained and questioned your neighbors. Thus, we quickly caught up to you. When you sailed from New York, our agents lined the docks and our men were installed in the cabins alongside you. Onboard, you had no conversations we did not overhear."

As Finny spoke, Franklin's face had changed utterly His expression became harder, and the veneer of sophistication fell from it. His family, Finny thought That was the key

He drove on. "Had you attempted to hide we would have unearthed you and dragged you—and your family—to England in shackles We would already have broken you on the rack. You would have kept back nothing

"But do not think yourself secure Even now, few men know your whereabouts: myself, the Prime Minister and his closest cohorts, a few trusted functionaries. We may still pursue a more dramatic method of extracting the truth from you. And if there is no truth to be had, well then, you have already been burned in effigy in every square in London. A few words in the right ears.... The English can be merciless in war, Mr Franklin And do not doubt that we are at war with you now."

The new Franklin bounded upright and lunged forward to challenge Finny, eye to eye The soldiers, awake now, stood also and grabbed at their sword hilts.

Franklin snapped, "A cowardly bullet in the night would be more the British style! 'Cleaning house,' I believe you call it? But perhaps you should beware, you and your precious Prime Minister and valiant countrymen! If I own the demonic powers you ascribe to me, I'm a dangerous man, not to be crossed, eh? Not to be crossed! Perhaps I shall burn you! Or summon snakes out from the walls right this moment, to do my bidding! Eh? Eh?"

"I doubt it," said Finny contemptuously, though not without a prickle of fear between his shoulder blades. "You have no idea how you did this. And maybe it's none of your doing after all Perhaps a more powerful magician did it on your account." He eyed Franklin up and down. "Yes, I believe that's it. You're nothing but a distraction. A scapegoat. You're completely harmless, Mr. Franklin Just another self-important colonial windbag."

The very air crackled. Finny did not so much as blink For an instant he believed it had worked, that he had penetrated Franklin's defenses

Then Franklin grinned, and the change rippled down through him Civilization reasserted itself, his pugnacity draining away "Ah, you goad me, sir Did I employ an Indian medicine man to do my bidding? An old Salem witch? And would it solve your mystery, if I had?" Franklin shook his head and relaxed back down into his chair "I enjoy your company immensely, Mr. Finny, but now you taunt me with trumped-up tales you cannot possibly believe. I fear we have reached the limits of what we can usefully discuss."

"I will decide that," said Finny coldly "Who are you, Mr Franklin? What are you? Don't you want us all to know how clever you are? So tell me, man. Quickly, now."

Cool as milk, Franklin pulled out his pipe and studied the bowl "You're floundering. Pass me along to your masters, sir Let us take the next step in the dance."

Finny had been so close; on the verge, perhaps, of a breakthrough. But the opportunity had evaporated Franklin was too many for him.

"Very well," said Finny curtly "Onward and upward with you."

The brittle pause stretched to cover the best part of a minute. Then Franklin smiled again, and Finny reluctantly smiled in return, and the two men shook hands

"SEND WORD TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE," SAID FINNY "I shall await him at Malbon's."

The spy nodded and left the room without a word. The guards were similarly taciturn. Finny wondered where the Pelhams found such solid mutes, and if they could be persuaded to talk, what tales they might tell.

Enough. He was weary and his head was sore Only coffee would ease the terrible ache that three and a half days with Franklin had installed there Lost in his thoughts, Finny approached his private rooms

Suddenly, he heard the rattle of a snake, like Satan's tongue in a pile of leaves.

Finny spun and backed up, searching the thick carpets around him for the intruder Then came the muffled wail of a child, and a laugh that was almost his own. He strode to the parlor and flung open the door

Alice, eight and tousle-headed, stood upon a chair with her hands over her mouth. Simon, six years older and approaching a languid elegance, lolled on the ottoman with a cruel and self-satisfied smile At Finny's entrance his children turned to face him. Simon's expression transforming to butter-wouldn't-melt, Alice's to disappointment.

Because she always hoped against hope that it would be her mother returning?

Damn it.

"Alice? Explain."

"Nothing, Papa," said Alice, but her eyes still scoured the room's deeper corners. "We were just playing."

Finny knew better Alice was deathly afraid of snakes, and Simon had just performed a perfect imitation of a rattler to terrify her.

He wanted to tell her that the code of the schoolyard was written by the bullies, that she should speak out if Simon were tormenting her But he could not bear to see the derision in his son's eyes.

Frustrated, Finny pointed to each of them in turn. "Alice! Latin translation, Virgil's *Aeneid*, two pages Simon! Fetch your boots and hat You're coming with me."

"Papa?" Alice still stood on the chair, uncertain

Ah, such a fine father he made His son bullying his daughter, and his response was schoolwork for the victim, and for the aggressor a cup of coffee

Finny strode across the room and scooped his little girl up into his arms. Snakebite could easily be fatal to a child. Alice's size. He felt her life in the balance every single day, and cursed his estranged wife for refusing to allow the children to go and stay with her in the country.

Alice was a-quiver. He kissed her forehead and whispered, "You know you can't come, darling. It's too dangerous outside. You're safe here, and we'll be back soon. You're not frightened, are you?"

A forlorn hope. For Alice, snakes lurked under every table and behind every door. She awoke screaming so often that Finny had moved a cot for her into his own bedchamber.

"Course not," Alice whispered back. "But, Papa, if I should become so..?"

Her words hung in the air. "Yes," said Finny reluctantly. "If you wish, you may go and see Mr. Benjamin."

It was all he could do.

"I don't even like coffee," Simon complained, as they pulled on their leathers and thick boots.

"Learn to," said Finny shortly. "The business of London is carried out in coffeehouses."

"I don't want—"

"You're coming," said Finny, with the absolute rule of fathers throughout the Empire, and the matter was settled.

NOW, IT NO LONGER SEEMED SUCH A GOOD IDEA.

"They say Franklin is impervious to snakebite," said Simon comfortably. "What do you think of that?"

"Folks can dream up a fine yarn about a man who's nowhere to be found," said Tom Malbon. "With no facts, rumors'll spread thicker than flies."

Simon took another swig of coffee. "D'ye know, I could learn to like this stuff. It really isn't so bad."

"It was supposed to be a punishment," said Finny, and Tom laughed, unoffended.

"So, come now, Tom," Simon persisted. "What would you say to Mr Franklin, if he were here now, in front of us?"

"Wouldn't say nothing," said Tom. "I'd punch him in the mouth and tie him to a chair. Then I'd put a dozen of his favorite rattlesnakes into a cock-pit, and toss him in along after, chair an' all, and see how clever a gentleman he thought himself then. And so we'd put your rumor to the test, young Simon, concerning his imperviousness. That's what I'd do."

"Would you indeed?" said Simon. "That does sound like a capital notion. Your thoughts, Father?"

"I say we are not Frenchmen," said Finny calmly, "and that no man should be punished without trial."

"I'd trust no magistrate," said his son. "For I'm quite certain that Mr. Franklin could twist his heart just as readily as—"

The coffeehouse door burst open, and in rushed five men with swords drawn, one clearly nobility, the other four surrounding and protecting him. They slammed the door, panting, and took stock of themselves and their clothing.

"Saved by the Duke," said Finny under his breath.

"NINE OF 'EM!" CRIED THOMAS PELHAM-HOLLES, DUKE OF Newcastle, Secretary of State, and brother to Henry Pelham, the Prime Minister, as he stamped back and forth in front of the fire. "Nine!"

"Your blood must be richer than mine," said Finny, and stepped up to shake his hand.

"Ha bloody ha," said Newcastle. "I should be wearing plate armor and riding in an iron carriage. If any horse could be persuaded to trot through these snake-infested streets, that is." He threw his gauntlets angrily onto the tabletop and sat to allow his man to tug off his heavy boots. The other guards prowled the room, checking behind doors and under tables, scanning the walls expertly for spyholes.

"As a silver lining, at least London's rat population has been seriously curtailed."

But Newcastle was clearly in no mood to joke. "Come," he said curtly, and stalked off into Malbon's back room even before his crew gave him the all-clear.

Finny caught his son's eye. "Don't get into any trouble," he warned. "We talked about this."

Simon just nodded and smiled, and raised his cup.

"Thus it may perhaps be objected to my Scheme, that the Rattle-Snake is a mischievous Creature, and that his changing his Nature with the Clime is a mere Supposition, not yet confirm'd by sufficient Facts. What then? Is not Example more prevalent than Precept? And may not the honest rough British Gentry, by a Familiarity with these Reptiles, learn to creep, and to insinuate, and to slaver, and to wriggle into Place (and perhaps to poison such as stand in their Way). Qualities of no small Advantage to Courtiers!"

Benjamin Franklin, ibid.

"Pitt is breathing down our necks," said Newcastle once the door was closed. "His spies are out shaking the bushes. He guesses some game is afoot, but he doesn't know what. Should he learn we have acquired 'Americanus' and kept him close, Henry and I should be in devilish hot water. Please tell me you've made some progress with the man."

Finny grimaced as they sat. "I'm out of my depth, and that's the truth."

"As are we all in this sorry world. And especially so if a raggle-arsed American can blight us with the wrath of God. But I hope that's not the total of the wisdom you summoned me to hear?"

"Not quite." Finny steepled his fingers, marshaling his thoughts. "Since you dumped Franklin in my lap, I've spent long—interminable!—hours questioning him on all aspects of his background, his beliefs and opinions, so forth.

"However you look at it, there's more to Franklin than meets the eye. Obviously he edits and publishes his own newspaper. In addition, he claims to have also founded a library company, a volunteer fire department, an academy, a philosophical society, a military company, a hospital, and for all I know, a cluster of other miscellaneous institutions that have slipped his mind. He's served as Philadelphia's Postmaster and a Justice of the Peace. And just before he fled the city he was elected to a seat in the Pennsylvania Assembly."

Newcastle eyed him shrewdly. "And you believe such a list?"

"Yes," said Finny. "Surely a little exaggeration here and there, some glossing over inconvenient details, but as far as I can tell the basics are true."

The Duke nodded. "They are indeed. That matches my intelligence. Go on."

"Very well. So, our Mr Franklin gives all the appearance of being a solid, civic-minded citizen. A clever man. Pragmatic. Worldly."

"Despite that, I do also believe his guilt. Through his writings he somehow conjured up this plague upon us. But, here's the nub of the matter: I don't believe even Franklin knows how he did it."

Newcastle snapped his fingers. "I'm not interested in beliefs. Facts, man. Evidence."

Finny nodded. "Then let's consider the rattlesnakes themselves. They're clearly of unnatural origin, confoundedly aggressive, and active out of all season. The American rattlesnake avoids people and rarely strikes unprovoked, and could not survive in this climate. Our London snakes resemble them closely, but can strike quicker and higher than your American rattler. And the clincher, the unquestionable link to Franklin? —The snakes avoid him completely. I've seen it with my own eye."

"Go on."

During one of their earliest sessions, while the atmosphere between them was still cordial, Finny had invited Franklin to join him in a walk around his garden, believing that in a congenial setting his guest might let something slip. They had ambled among the rosebushes, with Franklin holding forth; today it was philosopher-Franklin, and he was prating at length on the Inherent Nobility of the Snake and its use as an emblem of wisdom, endless duration, vigilance, and true courage, and the resulting ironies of the infestation

of London Finny, half-listening, was making a mental note to have the rosebushes sprayed with vinegar to ward off bugs

Then a rattlesnake barreled at them from the rhododendrons, propelling itself in an uncanny rolling spiral. "Guards!" called Finny, but the soldiers were too distant, and the snake was moving far too swiftly to be intercepted.

The snake rattled like hail on glass. Finny drew his sword, heart leaping. Franklin stood with his hands behind his back and regarded the creature with interest

At a distance of a dozen feet the snake halted and looked directly at Franklin. Its tongue flickered. It did not blink. Then it struck like lightning—not toward them, but off sideways, into the rosebushes and away through a hedge into the depths of the garden.

Belatedly, soldiers careered down the path. Finny waved them away

"Side-Winder," said Franklin. "I've never laid eyes on one before A remarkable method of locomotion, would you not agree?"

The blood thumped in Finny's ears, and he could smell his own sweat. Franklin regarded him coolly, his face displaying no hint of either contempt or sympathy.

For a mad moment Finny was tempted to run Franklin through and have done with him. But he sheathed his sword

"Remarkable. And would you also agree that, in your own country and almost within your own lifetime, that little display would have proved sufficient to have you hanged as a servant of the Devil?"

Franklin set off walking again. "Then we must thank the Lord these are more serious times, and we are gentlemen not prone to superstitious hysteria."

Privately Alice views Franklin as a collection of boxes. If she waits patiently, the right box lid will always open.

In the back room of the coffeehouse, Finny took a deep breath "There it was. The only time I have ever known such a beast to approach and not complete its attack."

"Franklin admits his affinity with the creatures?"

"Franklin admits nothing," said Finny wryly. "For, in addition to providing us a perfect excuse for convicting him, it would be against natural science, and Mr Franklin will insist until the cows come home that he is, above all, a man of reason. He has indeed achieved some fame as an inventor, having devised a novel type of stove, amongst other practical devices. Most recently he has indulged in some advanced speculations with electrical apparatus that have earned the attention of the Royal Society. His mind is unusually fertile, well ordered, and logical."

"You like the man," said Newcastle bluntly

Finny sighed. "No. I find him completely impossible But he owns qualities it is difficult not to respect."

ALICE FINNY HAS A RECURRING NIGHTMARE IN WHICH SHE stands at the top of the staircase as rattlesnakes flow up the stairs toward her. Timber snakes and diamondheads, spotted and mottled and banded in stunning hues of orange and silver, brown and green, they slither up from one step to the next, rattling as they come

As the leading snake approaches the top stair, Alice clearly hears its scales gliding on the dark wood, and the dry, dangerous sound breaks the spell that holds her.

She turns to run, but behind her there is nothing—no landing, no doors, only complete blackness

Alice teeters between the snakes and the inky dark Then she tumbles backward, down the stairs toward the serpents, and wakes with a shriek and a start

At this moment Alice Finny is well and truly awake, yet she has been so spooked by her brother's teasing that she still seems to hear the rattle and slither from her dreams. She climbs back onto the chair and looks all around, shielding her eyes from an imaginary sun. She pretends this is all make-believe, but her fear is real.

Surely there are rattlesnakes in their home, and Papa and Simon have left her to face them all alone

Alice jumps down from the chair and runs to find Mr Franklin

TOM MALBON BROUGHT IN A FRESH DISH OF COFFEE THE two men paused, waiting for him to depart.

Newcastle sipped and grimaced. "You drink this stuff often?"

"Constantly."

"That may explain a great deal." Newcastle pushed the cup away. "Anyway, while you've been respecting Mr. Franklin, we've sifted through a heap of intelligence gathered by our New England agents They have found no shortage of reputable witnesses willing to assign demonic or, at best, unusual abilities to Franklin, even among those still ignorant of the creeping horrors he has unleashed upon London.

"Franklin was born just fourteen years after the Salem witch trials, and grew up not a day's walk away from there That area is still rife with bizarre happenings. Yet, even by the standards of such a benighted place, Franklin's family—in particular his mother and some unsavory aunts—are viewed with unusual fear and suspicion Disappearances, fortuitous accidents, uncannily bad luck, curses and blights ... anything you can possibly imagine."

"Americans are prone to quaint superstitions," said Finny. "The colonies were founded in the first place by a collection of heretics odd enough and loud enough to be chased out of England." He paused, meaningfully. "Evidence?"

"The lack of evidence may be the strongest evidence there is," said Newcastle. "The Franklins' neighbors, both in their home town and in Philadelphia, are so desperately afraid that they won't provide details. They're scared to open their mouths. That in itself speaks volumes."

Finny shook his head. "Beg pardon? You're losing me."

"They fear him, Finny, and surely not for his logical mind. Convenient enough to pose as a man of reason. What better cover, for a servant of Satan?"

Finny laughed. "You think Franklin purchased his many civic successes by making a pact with the Devil?"

"I didn't say that I believe it." Newcastle drummed his fingers on the table. "I'm reporting what they say, his neighbors and friends Even his business partners accept the possibility Unaided, surely no one man could be capable of all the achievements Franklin is credited with. And Finny, let us not forget why we are having this conversation. No normal man's words come true merely by being published His intimate connection to this calamity is indisputable Only the mechanism is in doubt And there is no natural mechanism For a God-fearing man, what other conclusion could there be?"

"What does the Prime Minister think?"

"Henry will believe whatever you and I tell him to believe," said Newcastle bluntly. "But, come now. You have been with Franklin for days What else do you have? How would you assess the man's character?"

Finny quickly decided to be candid With a prominent Peer of the Realm advancing the belief that Franklin was in league with the Devil, Finny's own private theory did not seem so outlandish after all

Yet, it was still a ticklish idea to get across.

"Has character?" said Finny. "You'll need to be more specific For I believe that Franklin has several, all occupying the same head."

"What?" said Newcastle.

Finny drained his coffee, and reached over to slide the Duke's abandoned cup closer. "Aye Many completely different characters. Characters that make war against one another for control of him."

ALICE STAYS AWAY FROM THE WALLS, THE CORNERS, THE curtains Listening to her own racing heart, she yearns for the innocence of her childhood, when hiding beneath her bed was the

shrewdest way to avoid monsters.

She sees no soldiers on her way to Franklin, but in her distress this does not strike her as unusual.

Alice enters Franklin's quarters

Franklin is seated comfortably in an armchair reading a book, legs crossed at the ankles, eyeglasses perched upon his nose. He glowers at her in irritation at being disturbed. "How dare you?" he snaps ..

Then the Change occurs, and the aloof, scary Franklin is supplanted in an instant by Mr. Benjamin, the jovial teller of tall tales

Privately Alice views Franklin as a collection of boxes. If she waits patiently, the right box lid will always open.

"WHEN YOU INTERVIEW FRANKLIN, SIR, OBSERVE HOW HIS demeanor can alter in an instant. An example: his two most diverse aspects are the politician and the scientist, and neither could ever be confused for the other. The politician is the most charming and persuasive gentleman you'll ever meet. He could arbitrate any dispute, lead any disparate group of men to agreement in a trice. Should he take a fancy to be King of America, I don't doubt he could rally a sizable array of rich and poor to crown him."

"Charismatic, I'm sure, yet—"

"Wait. Then broach with him the subject of, say, electrical phenomena, his current passion. In the blink of an eye, Franklin changes. He shrivels in stature, his attention focuses inward rather than out. He is immediately in thrall to an obsession, and here's the meat of it: he can no longer explain himself in straightforward words, but jabbers about electrical jars and prime conductors and negatives and positives and self-moving wheels and jostling water-drops in thunderclouds and Lord-knows-what-all. His other souls are literate, compulsive explainers, clear-worded men, yet this... The scientist in him cares naught for explanation. His relationship with electricity is intimate and personal, and if you cannot share it or follow his line of thought, Franklin scorns and berates you."

"I've known many men who—"

"Another example," said Finny doggedly. "I am a father. So is Franklin. He has two sons, and a daughter named Sarah of a similar age to my own Alice. The politician in Franklin may well kiss babies for electoral advantage and pretend to be solicitous of their welfare. The scientist might study them, with a clever treatise in mind. But neither man could even talk to a child, let alone raise one. I would not suffer them to share the same room as my family. Yet when my Alice enters the room, a new Franklin emerges who is a born father, who speaks to her on her own terms and instinctively understands her. That Franklin I would trust with her life.

"In a second, he transforms completely. Half a second! The Franklins are different in temper, in expression, in recollection, almost even in physical form. They are not mere moods or humors. I tell you, Newcastle, they are different men."

"I see," said Newcastle, sitting back.

Finny drank a mouthful of the Duke's coffee, for courage. "My conclusion is as follows. I believe there is a Franklin I have not yet met, and that is the Franklin who bears responsibility for our current plague of serpents. You must lure out and question that Franklin. Consult any of the others and you'll just waste your time."

"Finny, Finny," said Newcastle gently. "I don't doubt your sincerity, but this is utter balderdash. I fear the departure of your wife has unhinged you. Did you not tell me just a month since that she, too, was a completely different person these days?"

Finny gaped. "I ... no, that was purely a figure of speech. I was upset."

"By her desertion of you, and especially of your children." The Duke consulted his pocket watch. "I understand completely. By the way, I hear tell that she is suing you for independent maintenance."

Finny gripped the arms of his chair, suddenly adrift in dire seas, and Newcastle hurriedly added, "I mention it only so that you will be cognizant of how the women are gossiping. Eh? And I'm sure you're right about Franklin. But, tempus fugit. I must report back to my brother at Downing Street, before nightfall further increases the hazard of the journey.

"In the morning I shall send my men to reclaim Mr. Franklin. Our committee is assembled, a couple of gentlemen each from the Cabinet and the Royal Society, a colonel or two, men of discretion all. And, in deference to your theories, I'll add a doctor and an asylum master. Rest assured that your efforts in this matter will be rewarded at the appropriate time."

The Duke stood, but paused a moment. "One thing I'll say for your notion. Franklin writes polemicals under a series of assumed names, each with their own distinct voice. Silence Dogood, Poor Richard Saunders, Martha Careful, Celia Shortface. Polly Baker. 'Americanus' himself." He shrugged. "It may mean something, or nothing at all."

"Celia Shortface?"

Finny found himself smiling. It seemed that, after all, at least one of the Ben Franklins had a sense of humor.

"Thus Inconveniences have been objected to that good and wise Act of Parliament, by virtue of which all the Newgates and Dungeons in Britain are emptied into the Colonies. It has been said that these Thieves and Villains introduc'd among us, spoil the Morals of Youth in the Neighbourhoods that entertain them, and perpetrate many horrid Crimes ..."

Benjamin Franklin, ibid

Mr. Benjamin has just told Alice a funny story involving a talking goose. She never knew geese had such deep voices. Papa never does this anymore, this relaxed happy storytelling, and Alice misses it.

She is still giggling when she hears a distant splintering crash from the front of the house, and moments later, a cry of pain.

Mr. Benjamin twists like an eel and another box opens, he is now a jerky, intense man. Alice does not recognize. He springs up onto the balls of his feet and listens, alert as a terrier.

"Don't go," Alice urges him, afraid.

He waves at her to be quiet, and mutters his reply. "How could I? I am held prisoner here."

"But the soldiers are gone," says Alice without thinking, and then puts her hands up to her mouth at the awful realization. What if Franklin runs away and Papa blames her?

He shows no sign of doing so. She sees his mind racing and hears, from the hallway beyond the closed door, the sound of stealthy footfalls approaching.

"Damn it," murmurs Franklin, twitching.

She gasps. "What?"

"I think perhaps someone is cleaning house."

Alice shakes her head, baffled. Housework is much noisier than this uneasy quiet. She begins to walk toward the door—maybe the soldiers are returning—but Franklin hisses in frustration and shoves her back behind the leather armchair, where she will be unseen by anyone entering the room. Darting to the fireplace for a poker, he steps forward boldly and waits.

The door opens. Men glide into the room like winter shadows. Alice smells a sudden reek of mud and sweat and worse, and stops inhaling. A strong Cockney voice that might have been amusing under other circumstances says, "Hamericanus?"

"What of it?" says Franklin in a low grating voice and hurls him-

Each Franklin holds himself uniquely, contorts or straightens like a ramrod, clings to Alice or guides her, mutters, or purses his lips.

self at them. Alice hears a violent blow and a cry, and runs around the chair.

Franklin crouches, clutching his stomach, coughing. He has knocked one of their attackers back on his arse, but five others surround him, vibrant with menace. They are ruffians, men of the docks and the alleyways, shabbily dressed, and they seem to fill the room to capacity.

Alice steps up and places her hand on Franklin's arm. She glares up at the rogues with unblinking imperiousness and says, "Leave him be, or my father shall see you hanged."

"Get away from me," gasps Franklin. Alice cannot tell whether he is addressing her or the intruders.

They push her aside and hustle Franklin toward the door. Then "Bring 'er too," says their ringleader, a man slightly less filthy than the rest, with more of his teeth remaining.

Cobbett, no!" one of the men protests, but Cobbett leans back and says "Yes!" with a dangerous finality, the brass knuckles on his fingers glinting in the gaslight, and two of them reach back to grab Alice's hands, yanking her off her feet.

THE BUTLER STANDS IN THE FRONT HALLWAY, FLANKED BY two more of Cobbett's men. His eyes widen when he sees Alice and Franklin being frog-marched down the stairs. Another rogue stands at the broken front door watching the street.

Allo again, pal," says Cobbett, grabbing the butler's lapel. "Found 'em. Despite your sad lack of 'elp. My, but you're all clean and tidy. Shall I blood you, so you can tell of 'ow bravely you fought us?"

Not pausing for an answer, Cobbett draws his dagger and slices a long furrow through the man's starched shirt and into the meat of his chest. The butler's howl is abruptly choked off when one of Cobbett's henchmen whacks his backjack across the man's neck. Alice, eyes closed, tries to keep breathing.

"Right then," Cobbett says. "'Ow's the outside?"

"All quiet," replies the lookout.

"Very good." Cobbett turns to Franklin. "Your rattlesnakes may be hell for business, but at least they keep the streets clear, eh?"

"You won't get away with this," says Franklin calmly.

Cobbett rubs his thumb and fingertips together. "Don't be bettin' on yer soldier-boys, now. They're long gone, spendin' what I gave 'em, and pawnin' the house silver besides. I reckon they wasn't cut out for the military life anyway."

"WE SHOULD HAVE TOLD TOM MALBON WE HAVE FRANKLIN," said Simon, half-walking and half-skipping down the street. "Picture his expression!"

"You swore me your oath as a gentleman," said Finny sharply. "An oath that you came close to breaching."

"I promised I wouldn't tell a soul, and I haven't and shan't. Really, Father, even with a hint as broad as the Thames, Malbon could never have guessed it. For all the world knows, 'Americanus' is cowering in a hot-hole in the Canadas. But just imagine—"

"Never mind!" said Finny. "No more imagining. We're washing our hands of Franklin, and thank God. Tomorrow he goes forward to a motley inquisition of soldiers, politicians, and natural philosophers, handpicked by the Pelhams."

Only a single rattlesnake accosted them on the journey home, a small creature like dark green ribbon that Finny nimbly dispatched with a stroke of his sword. But this splendid luck did not hold: they arrived back at Hanover Square to find the front door crookedly ajar, the butler prone and bleeding, and no trace of Franklin, Alice, soldiers, or maids.

A BROKEN-DOWN TERRACE HOUSE, OFF A DIRTY ALLEYWAY dappled with shadow. The rogues usher Alice and Franklin down slippery stone steps and through a door into a dank basement cluttered with cheap, decrepit furniture: a table, chairs, an iron clawfoot bath, a packing case. The wooden piling that lines the walls is splintered and rotten: Alice can smell mold and other, more evil odors.

The place stinks like dirty bathrooms and rotting rubbish combined.

Alice clutches Mr. Benjamin's hand. Despite the chill, his palm is damp. At first he seemed unnaturally calm, and Alice took strength from him, but now Franklin shakes and breathes hard, and Changes compulsively.

Franklin's come and go, advertised by the altering pressure of his hand. Each Franklin holds himself uniquely, contorts or straightens like a ramrod, clings to Alice or guides her, mutters or purses his lips.

Now, as they position him in the center of the basement, and the man they call Cobbett marches up to stand toe to toe with him, Franklin becomes very still. Alice cannot tell which box is open now, and this is perhaps the most frightening thing of all.

"WE NEED SOLDIERS!"

They ran out into the street, as if help would magically appear for the asking. It did not.

Finny's mind was a void. He forced reason into it.

They had been betrayed after all. Villains had come for Franklin. And, for whatever reason, they'd stolen Alice as well. As a bargaining chip? A plaything?

Finny only realized he had unsheathed his sword when he saw the blade wavering in front of his eyes.

Snakes were driven by blind instinct, but men could be cruel, sadistic, black-hearted.

Finny turned. "I told nobody," said Simon quickly, backing up. "I hate Franklin, of course I do, any true Englishman must, but I'd never defy you, Father, never risk . . . this! Harm to us! To Alice!"

"Ridiculous," said Finny. "Stupid."

He seized Simon by the throat and rammed him up against the wall of the house. "Who else? You're a stranger now. Headstrong and vicious, always out for your own amusement. Who else but you?"

"The soldiers, perhaps . . ." Simon reached for Finny's hand and tried to ease its terrible grip on his neck. "Maid. Butler. Mr. Pitt could have learned . . . Any of dozens."

"Did they give you money? Or did you do it just for hatred's sake? If Alice dies—"

"She shan't," said Simon. "We mustn't allow it." And then, looking beyond Finny's shoulder, Simon's eyes widened. "The snakes, Father. Look at the snakes."

ALICE SCANS THE BASEMENT FOR ANYTHING THAT MIGHT AID them in their plight, but sees nothing. The only way out is through the door they came in, and that way is blocked by five of Cobbett's dreadful men.

They peel her away from Franklin and sit her in a nearby chair; dirty hands pressing upon her shoulders to keep her still.

"You'll find us blunt fellows," says Cobbett to Franklin. "Plain questions, quick results. Get me?"

"I understand," says Franklin. "You're souls of the utmost simplicity."

Cobbett slaps him. "Don't need any of your lip. Nor yer filthy snakes neither. Tell us where they come from, and 'ow to stop 'em."

"Who's paying you? What will it cost to secure our release?"

Brass knuckles pound into his gut. Franklin bends double and spits on the floor, a ragged red.

"We're our own men." Cobbett grasps Franklin by the hair and pulls him upright again. "This is our city too. Our families are here. Our livings. Don't insult us."

Franklin smiles grimly through teeth flecked with blood. Little puffs of brightness seem to sparkle around him from the blows. "Very well. I understand. But, my good fellow, there's no single source for the serpents. No pipe you can block, no tunnel to brick up. They appear everywhere. Even your own people realize this."

Cobbett draws his dagger, still bloody-edged from the butler. "But you brought 'em. So you can tell us 'ow to be shot of 'em."

"Club them, cut them up. Burn them, one by one," says Franklin. "En masse, as a phenomenon? I can't tell you. I comprehend this little better than you do."

Without looking at her, Cobbett points the dagger out sideways

toward where Alice sits. She cringes, even though she has been trying so hard to sit up straight and be brave. "All right, then. This 'ere girl. Mean something to you?"

Chills run up her spine.

"Tell us what we need to know, Mr. Hamericanus. Or..."

"I'm not afraid!" says Alice, and her clear voice does not tremble.

"You'd harm a child?" asks Franklin coldly.

Cobbett whips the dagger back and presses it to Franklin's throat. "I 'arm anyone I need to. The snakes, man. Talk to me."

ONLY A FEW FEET SEPARATE THEM, BUT WHEN FRANKLIN turns his head to stare at her long and hard, Alice immediately understands that he is saying goodbye.

Another Change is coming. This time the box opens slowly with an almost audible creak. Shadows move behind Franklin's eyes, sinuous shapes that Alice cannot fathom. For a moment he looks angry, and then sorrowful, and then his features begin to twist and warp until he no longer looks like a civilized man.

And perhaps even Cobbett is aware of the impending threat, for now he tucks away the dagger and punches Franklin coldly and methodically in the mouth, stomach, and kidneys. With each callous blow, Alice screams and wriggles, fighting now, determined to help Franklin if she can or at least to cause as much trouble for these awful men as possible in the time they have left.

Cobbett steps away. He looms over Alice, dagger again in his hand, and stares into Franklin's eyes. "Well?"

On hands and knees in this reeking basement, coughing up blood, Americanus glares up at Cobbett and his accomplices and says, in a voice that freezes and crackles, simply, "Stop."

"Oh, you're in trouble now," says Alice. She is talking to Cobbett, for she can see that nothing of Papa's Franklin or her Mr. Benjamin remains. Power radiates from him. And he outnumbers them. Perhaps Mr. Franklin is finally admitting a strand of himself that he has spent years burying deep beneath his other selves, for at that moment Alice hears him chanting words she cannot understand, in a voice she does not recognize, an ancient cunning, wrapped in an angry malevolence.

The new man within Franklin tilts up his head and raises his voice. He calls to New England, to the ancient ones of fire and water. He calls to his aunts.

The air ripples around them. Far above the cellar, the sky shifts. Franklin rears up on his haunches and lifts his hands to massage and weave the air, babbling.

The ruffians gape. Alice sits absolutely still, eyes wide. She knows that Franklin has already forgotten her name.

THE TRICKLE OF SNAKES BECAME A FLOW. RATTLESNAKES slithered down the street past them.

His red-smeared mind primed to kill, Finny released his son and walked into the path of a five-foot timber rattlesnake, ready to smash its skull. America squirmed at his feet.

Finny's blow never fell. The reptile slid fluidly around him, as did the next snake, and the one after. The rattlesnakes were no longer interested in spilling noble blood.

The men—for Simon must surely now be accounted a man, responsible for his own actions—looked at each other, and back at the snakes.

The wind rose. Storm clouds scudded across the sky. Dust and leaves skittered along the street. Wind, clouds, and snakes—all shared a single direction.

"Come along," said Finny.

ALICE HEARS A RATTLING SOUND AND FOR A BLESSED, unreasonable second she believes Simon has come to rescue her. Until a rattlesnake, a brown-and-gold monster with a darting tongue, appears from a hole in the wall five steps away from her.

Suddenly the walls are alive, every movement a head shimmering, a body sliding. They pour into the cellar like deadly water.

Alice opens her mouth, but this time her muscles are too tight for the scream to escape.

Franklin leaps and whirls like an Irishman dancing. His fist cracks against Cobbett's jaw, and the dagger flies through the air. Then Franklin scoops Alice up and lifts her high off the floor with both hands, a floor that is quickly becoming a morass of rattlesnakes.

Franklin's eyes are wide. He is sweating and shouting something she cannot make out over the rumble of thunder and the hissing racket of the serpents. His rage is solid, tangible: any moment he may cast her down. Alice gulps and her eyes roll back in her head, and mercifully, she faints.

FINNY AND SIMON WALKED QUIETLY AMID THE RATTLESNAKES. By now they were beyond terror. To Finny, they seemed to be almost floating down the street, with Alice somewhere ahead of them and only darkness at their backs. As yet, no snake had attacked them.

They turned a corner into a Soho alleyway, and now there was a real chance they might tread on a snake in the gloom. Finny found he was clutching his swordstick with a deathly grip and, in relaxing that grip, further realized he had left his gauntlets back at the house. His hands were unprotected, his sleeves gaped.

He heard a high scream and looked up to find three thugs rushing toward him.

The air was suddenly full of darting snakes. One after another they struck the ruffians, coiled springs that became lances, the hiss, the rattle, the stab. One man spun in the air, another tripped. Both went down, to be instantly submerged beneath a roiling sea of death. The third smashed headlong into the pavement like a falling tree.

A fourth thug high-stepped toward them, eyes wide, but more calm and careful about where he trod. Simon curled his shoulder down as if he were on a rugby field and tackled the man hard into the wall. Half a dozen snakes arrowed out to strike Simon from ankle to thigh, but he was oblivious. They fell away from his protective leathers and squirmed off into the night.

The ruffian gave a titanic twist that almost broke Simon's hold, but froze when he found Finny's blade at his neck.

"My sister," said Simon. "The little girl. And the American. Where are they?" He threw a hard punch at the ruffian's nose, in the process bashing the man's head against the brick wall behind him. He rapidly became cooperative.

"In the cellar, guv'nor," said the thug, pointing. "But the place is a nest o' vipers..."

Simon kicked the man's feet out from under him, dropping him to the street. As the snakes struck at the rogue's face and arms, chest and trunk, Simon snatched Finny's sword and slashed the man's throat open.

Without another word, Simon walked on.

Finny's ears rang with the boil and gurgle of the thug's death. He gaped at his son's retreating back.

Simon's valor held until he was at the brink of the stone steps, and then evaporated. Snakes flowed over his boots and down the steps like a waterfall. He reached a hand to the wall to steady himself and began to sob. "Alice! Alice!"

Finny did not hesitate. He went to Simon, gently reclaimed the sword from his shaking hand, and walked down the stairs to the hissing cellar.

ONLY THE FORCE OF A FATHER'S LOVE COULD HAVE propelled Finny down those steps.

The cellar stank of mold and rot, overlaying the bass reek of excrement. Finny stopped on the next-to-last stair and a canebrake rattler lunged at him, fangs striking his jacket just above his bare wrist.

Finny hardly noticed.

Virgil, he thought distantly. *A Virgil translation, my last gift to her. How cruel and foolish.*

The cellar was ankle-deep in snakes, and still they came, out of the walls, down the stairs, through holes in the ceiling, up through the floor. It was a purgatory of rattle and hiss, lit only by a single swaying

lantern that cast dull ripples of yellow across the unearthly scene.

Through his trance, Finny felt his eyes drawn to the one area nearby that did not undulate. It was a man's body, torn bloody, lying back over a chair. Clearly dead, the corpse continued to shudder as snakes struck at it again and again. Finny saw the glint of brass on the man's fingers just before a snake's head flickered out of his sleeve.

Nauseated, Finny's knees weakened. He might have fallen or fled had he not caught sight of Benjamin Franklin, who stood at the far side of the cellar, grabbing up snakes with his bare hands and thrusting them into his pockets.

Finny blinked, rejecting the vision. Where was his daughter? What had become of Alice in this hell? He prepared to wade out into the churning sea of rattlesnakes, but could not bring himself to leave that final step.

The American's expression was as sheer as a chalk cliff. He wore no feathers, merely his usual dark breeches and stockings, and those flat-heeled shoes with high round tongues and large silver buckles. Madness.

Finny could see the shoes because Franklin stood in a clear circle, no snake within six inches of his feet. Again Franklin bent and plunged his hands into the seething mass.

"What are you doing?" Finny shouted. "Get out of there!"

Franklin straightened, a rattlesnake twisting in each hand, and glared at him. Finny shivered.

This was neither the politician nor the philosopher. Not the scientist or the father. This was a new Franklin, a Franklin of irrational power, spawned of witches. Finny did not doubt that he was at last seeing the sorcerer who had laid the killing curse of serpents upon England.

And his glare was pure frost.

I told him we arrested his children. Finny thought suddenly. He took a step back away from the icy shaman and tripped on the stair. Tumbling onto his arse, he felt a terrifying writhe-and-shiver beneath him as a rattlesnake squirmed free. Finny leapt up as the snake whipped wide-jawed into his knee and recocheted off into the mass of its companions on the cellar floor.

Once again Franklin shoved snakes into his waistcoat and jacket. A rumble of thunder carved through the roar of the snake pit. "What are you doing?" Finny shouted again, his voice shrill with hysteria. "Where's Alice?"

For an instant the scientist in Franklin awoke and frowned impatiently. "I surely don't know." Then he dismissed Finny once more and returned to his absorption of the endless stream of rattlesnakes.

A third time, thought Finny. *If I ask a third time, maybe he'll tell me the truth.* The cellar walls began to vibrate and flex, and Finny had the sudden image of the entire house transforming into a huge serpent, trapping them inside. The air thickened.

Franklin spread his arms wide. Finny felt a prickle along his own arms and shoulders.

"Franklin!"

All at once rattlesnakes attacked the American, darting and stabbing him from all directions. Simultaneously, Finny was deafened by a giant roar. The stink of burning flooded his nose.

The building jumped, as if slammed by a colossal sledgehammer. Finny stumbled, raised his bare hands, and toppled forward into the sea of snakes.

HARD FLOOR BENEATH HIM. HIS SON STARING DOWN, open-mouthed.

"I'm all right," said Finny. If he was still alive, it must be true.

Simon helped him up. The cellar was blackened, the table charred, the floor ankle-deep in ash. In one corner the ceiling had collapsed in a mess of brick and splintered wood. The body over the chair was now a twisted charcoal-heap, blasted beyond recognition. Of Franklin and his rattlesnakes there was no sign.

Hot pain drenched Finny's hands. His palms were burnt sooty. On his left wrist and the back of his right hand he wore the double red puncture wounds of snakebite, yet Finny felt no fever or deadening of sensation in his arms. He would live.

They found Alice under the upturned bathtub, wrapped in rags and dusted with fine ash, unconscious but unharmed. Unbitten. Breathing evenly. Simon dissolved into racking sobs. He snatched up his sister and fled out of the cellar.

Just like Franklin, Simon was a collection of miraculous strangers.

Finny walked slowly upstairs after them. Father and son sat on the curbside cradling Alice, looking everywhere but at each other. Simon snuffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Above them the night was radiant with stars.

"A lightning bolt," said Simon suddenly. "Like a snake, striking from the sky, straight into the building. Blew me backward into the street. Then a smell like nothing on Earth."

Finny nodded. "Franklin's doing. He was in there, with the snakes. He raised his hands and drew down the lightning, and that's all I remember."

A high-pitched laugh forced itself out from Simon's throat. "I suppose none of this should surprise us. After all, by Franklin's own admission, he is superlative at everything."

"Was," said Finny grimly. "No one could have survived that."

"You did," said Simon. "I'll wager that in a couple of months, our Mr. Franklin will pop up again in Philadelphia and resume his political career as if nothing untoward has occurred."

They found Alice under the upturned bathtub, wrapped in rags and dusted with fine ash, unconscious but unharmed. Unbitten.

Finny recalled the snakes springing at Franklin from every side. "Impossible," he said. "Inconceivable."

Unless ... the snakes had not been attacking Franklin, after all.

The weight of mystery became too great to bear. Finny stood, swaying as he lifted his sleeping daughter.

Simon said shyly, "I can carry her. If you like."

"No," said Finny.

On Long Acre they glimpsed a lone rattlesnake retreating into the dark, obeying its natural habit of timidity.

Alice stirred, her movements sending shards of pain through Finny's hands. He feared that she would awaken hysterical, but she looked around and took in the situation with calm aplomb. "He's gone, isn't he, Papa?"

Finny did not ask how she knew. He could no longer distinguish the remarkable from the commonplace. "Yes, Mr. Benjamin has gone, and taken the worst of the snakes with him. And the nightmares have gone too, Alice, gone forever. You'll always be safe now."

He paused, then continued firmly. "And, Alice, very soon, your mother will return."

Alice closed her eyes again, content.

Sometimes, saying the words can make them true.

Sometimes.

"I told Franklin a lie," said Finny presently. "I said we'd arrested his children. Treated them roughly. I invented it, just to provoke him. I surely wish I hadn't."

"I expect he realized that."

Finny glanced sideways. His son's stride was relaxed enough, but his shoulders were stiff and his gaze downcast.

"You did betray us, Simon. You did. Didn't you?"

Briefly, Simon closed his eyes.

"It's all right," said Finny, forcing the words out. "Under the circumstances."

"No," said Simon, desolately.

Finny sighed. "Carry your sister," he said, and guided his children home. ❧

Meta-Physics

>> When it comes right down, is it everyone has faith in something

BY ELIZABETH M. GLOVER
ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARMON

YOU'D THINK THE UPPER EAST SIDE OF MANHATTAN

just made him homesick.

solid form and lidled up to them. "Pardon me, do you have a match

es and offered a matchbook.

matchbook, then seized the man's wrist.

ion. "Oh my God.

up—free will indeed!—and they re

was entertainment!

their illustrations with us and we wish we could have shown

Realms of Fantasy

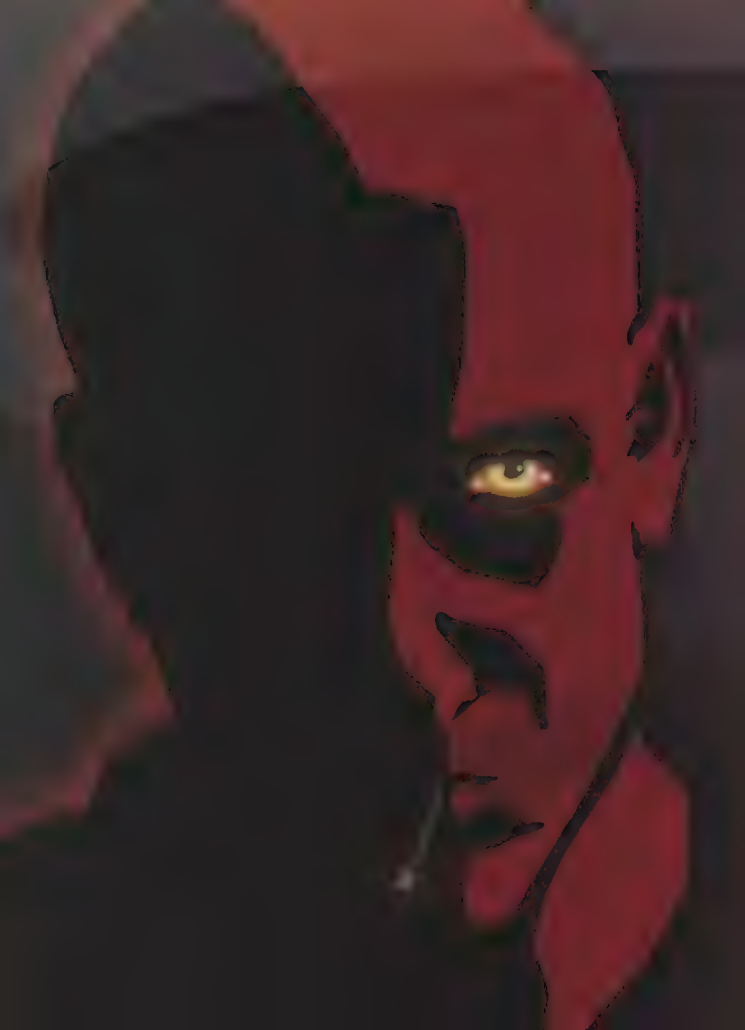


ILLUSTRATION BY CAMERON MUNK

The man's mouth worked in silent shock for a moment. He groped at his neck and came up with a crucifix on a gold chain. "Back! Get back, I say!"

"Do I look like a vampire?" Merchari snorted small blue flames. "Look, pal, just come along quietly, OK? I'll see that you get a nice assignment in the bioweapons division."

The man kept tugging. He pounded his other fist on Merchari's wrist. It was all useless, and the wind off the river suddenly blew warmer—the first twinges of the Gate opening. The fellow dropped to his knees and found his voice. "*Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum.*"

Ach! Merchan released the man and recoiled, his palm scorched and smoking. "Sir! Sir! That's enough! English will do the trick. No need for the high octane." Latin? That was the risk of the scientific enclaves—you might run into a Jesuit education.

The man continued his prayer, but the woman, who had remained scientifically calm, tugged on his sleeve. "Dennis, I think it's OK. You hurt him."

Dennis surged to his feet. "Then go away!"

"In a moment, in a moment." Merchan regarded the woman. Dennis was off limits because he had prayed, and he believed in what he was saying. But the woman hadn't done the same. Merchan leaned toward her and sniffed. Yep, that definite metallic scent. "You're an atheist, aren't you?"

"Don't answer him, Christine," the man said, putting his arm around her shoulders. "I can keep him away from you."

"Only if she believes what you're saying." Merchan returned his attention to the woman. "Well?"

Christine cocked her head to one side. "Yes, I'm an atheist. Is that a problem? I guess you can't take me if I don't believe in you or your supposed origin."

"That's a bit of a contradiction, isn't it? I'm standing right here."

"I'd say so, but there was incense burning in the restaurant. And all these people"—she gestured at the moderate crowds passing them on the sidewalk—"don't seem to see you. I'd say hallucinations are a high likelihood."

"Would you." Merchan leaned in and inhaled her bouquet. A magnificent sample, probably lapsed Catholic. "Ooh, you are quality." Her eyes flashed with irritation. "The important point is that you don't have any prayers to protect you. If it makes it easier, you can pretend the fires are just hallucinations."

Dennis started in with the *Pater Noster* again. Merchari jolted from his appreciation of the woman. "Sir, you're done. Your exemption has been proven. But your prayers can't help an unbeliever." Merchan extended his hand. "Come along, girlie. You're fair game."

"Because I don't have prayers."

"That's right. Don't you logical types study the classics anymore? If you'd followed Pascal's Wager, you'd at least hedge your bets. Too late now."

The warm wind rose again, and a few tattered pages of an abandoned *New York Times* skittered down the sidewalk and clung to Christine's calves. She kicked at them in vexation until the wind reclaimed them. "Which is Pascal's Wager again?"

"Tell her, Catholic boy. They must have covered that at Fordham."

"Manhattan College, actually." Dennis still hovered protectively near the woman, but had calmed a bit. "You remember it from Grening's class, don't you, Chris? The one about how it won't hurt to believe in God if there isn't one, but not believing will get you sent to Hell, so you may as well play it safe and believe."

"Oh yeah, that one." Christine flicked her fingers dismissively. "A false dichotomy. For it to make any sense, one must already believe the premise that there's a deity who desires human faith, as opposed to, say, the sacrifice of animals. You might as easily suggest I hedge my bets by offering hecatombs to Zeus and Athena."

Hmmmm.

The woman ran fingers through her short, blonde curls. "Look, I'll take it as a given that you're real, that you're a demon, and that you're here to take me to Hell. So let's get back to the point. Do any holy words work? Like, if a Buddhist recited a *koan*, would that keep you off?"

Merchari narrowed his eyes. They didn't usually converse. Usually they were too busy gibbering or running. "What's with the questions?"

"Just the natural curiosity of a scientist." The woman shrugged. "If you're going to drag me off to Hell, the least you can do is show me the full error of my ways. Should I have listened to the nuns, or would any religion do?"

Ah, a theological discussion. It had been a while. "I don't know. Someone recited from the Koran once—that worked. I know the . . . prayer your friend said works when recited in Chinese, although Latin is more effective."

"Interesting."

Dennis took her arm again. "Christine, what are you doing?"

"It's OK, Dennis. Just relax."

"That's right, Dennis." Merchari said. The man started at hearing his name from demonic lips. "Just let me conclude my business."

Christine eased a step closer. "You got a name, demon?"

"That doesn't work."

"Huh?"

"The name thing. It doesn't work."

"I'm not a fricking *wizard*, I'm a biochemist." Christine huffed her annoyance. Merchan smiled inwardly. They always got testy when they were losing. Christine continued. "If I don't believe in *you*, I certainly don't believe in that mystical crap. I just want to know what to call you."

Oh. "Merchan." He performed a courtly bow.

"Thank you. You know, Merchari, I think you're wrong about something."

"Oh? What's that?" Still searching for loopholes. She was almost brave enough to get an exemption on valor alone.

"That bit about me having no holy words." She raised her head

and looked him square in the eyes. "Force equals mass times acceleration," and she drove her fist into his face.

Shards of pain splayed behind his eyes and Merchari cried out. How had she *done* that? She'd *hit* him! And it had *hurt*! He staggered backward and touched a hand to his nose. Silver fluid flowed down his face. "How—? You shouldn't be able to touch me!"

Christine cradled her fist in her other hand, gritting her teeth. "Mercury for blood. Holy crap, that hurt."

"Good. But how—?"

"Simple physical law." She spat a few more choice imprecations and grimaced down at her red and swelling knuckles. "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction," she muttered.

This was going to be a little harder than Merchari had assumed, but one human female couldn't possibly take on a minion of Hell. She was a prime specimen, a grade A atheist with spunk, and his reputation would be made if he bagged her. He would have his pick of ass-grunents.

Merchari leaped at her, arms wide, ready to grab.

Instead of ducking, running, or clinging to Dennis, she calmly whirled to one side. Her arm darted out, and her hand seized his wrist, deftly avoiding the spur talon. "An object in motion will tend to stay in motion—" And she pulled, accelerating him past her and throwing him to the ground.

He lay sprawled, dazed and in pain. She leaned over him.

"—unless acted upon by an external force," she finished.

All right, no more playing around. Merchari leaped up and hovered ten feet in the air. He unfurled his wings with a leathery snap, shredding his trench coat, and cranked up the heat on his fiery nimbus like a kid with a magnifying glass on an ant. It was a display that never failed to send the bravest human cowering.

Christine folded her arms across her chest and rolled her eyes. What's the fuel for those flames?"

"Fuel?" They were just his nimbus, unholy light, part of being a demon. What was she on about?

Yeah, fuel. What are you burning?

"I m

Because you need to burn something. The total energy of a closed system remains constant."

And with a woosh, his aura went out.

And those wings are all wrong. In the first place, they're not even built for flying, much less hovering. I mean, honestly—bat's wings! She craned her neck to get a better look. "You're barely flapping. And they grow straight out of your back, practically vertical. How do you get any leverage?

They do me all right."

No, no, no. Can't work. Force equals *G-M-m* over *R*-squared."

Merchari blinked. "What?"

Christine sighed with exasperation. "The force of gravitational attraction between two bodies is equal to the universal constant *G*, multiplied by the masses of the two bodies, divided by the square of the distance between them. You're too heavy. Those wings could never provide enough lift."

And Merchari suddenly *felt* his own weight, a crushing force, and he realized the problem with having heavy, dense mercury for blood. He flailed his wings, but he crashed to the ground, cracking the sidewalk with the force of his impact.

Christine crouched beside him and patted him on the head. "The Earth is large and you're very close to it." She stood and backed away from him. "I'm glad I didn't have to cite the aerodynamic laws it's been a long time since undergrad physics."

Dennis waved one of his hands in thought. "You need the angle of attack, and—and the surface area of the wing? And maybe the speed at which he flaps them?"

Ugh, I can never remember; if I was any good at fluid dynamics I'd have been an engineer. Anyway, it doesn't matter. The beginning of the explanation apparently was enough.'

This was intolerable!' Merchari rolled to his side and snarled at Dennis. "Keep out of this, you, or I might forget the rules that protect you." He spat a fang onto the pavement and stood to face the woman again. He was going about this wrong. He knew most of these laws, sort of. Hell had a whole section devoted to scientists. "You! Woman! Newtonian laws aren't entirely accurate."

'They're just fine at these speeds. If you want to accelerate us to a significant percentage of lightspeed, then I'll pull out the complicated equations.

No, that would never do. She'd just go on about infinite mass and squash him to a singularity. Damn it, she was *such* a prize. Merchari rubbed on a talon and glowered at her. Maybe he could introduce doubt. ... "You reduce your own position using physical laws this way. Only faith defeats me. Is your understanding of these laws predicated on mere belief?"

Christine nodded thoughtfully. "Ultimately. All scientific laws rest on a single belief: that what we perceive is real. And if somehow it isn't, it doesn't matter. Empiricism still holds. The nugget of belief is irrelevant to the usefulness of the results." She walked up to him and

ILLUSTRATION BY ANNIKA DE CASTRO

poked him in the chest. "*That*'s why they hurt so much. It's not a test of faith, it's a test of reality. Can you change reality?"

Remarkable maneuvering. Such a disappointment. Merchari hung his head, defeated. "No."

"Well, then. The coefficient of friction between two surfaces, multiplied by the parallel component ..."

"No!" Merchari reeled back, cowering. "No more! Please!"

' . . of a force applied at an angle to the surfaces, results in a parallel force applied to the objects, imparting motion."

Nothing happened. Merchari peeked out from behind his claws. What was that? It didn't do anything."

It's the equation for the useful force of friction. It's what allows you to walk." Christine pointed one impetuous finger down the street. I suggest you use it.

Like facing the Big Boss himself. Merchari imagined what Christine would look like with horns and a beard. Then he turned and trudged west, toward the subway. And felt a little homesick.

The thing about heirlooms is that even if you don't want them, you often just can't get rid of them.

Restless In My Hand

THE MAN ON THE DOORSTEP WORE A DARK BLUE SUIT AND A RED FELT BOWLER HAT stained with black juices, and the teeth in his wide smile bulged from bleeding gums. Richard stood half behind the door, wrinkling his nose, and said, "Can I help you?"

"I'm delivering a family heirloom," the man said, and gestured toward a large wooden crate standing at the bottom of the steps next to Bev's begonias. The man kept smiling—if you could call it a smile—even as a trickle of blood seeped from his gums and dripped down one incisor. Richard leaned out of the doorway a bit, but didn't see any other men, or even a dolly, and he wondered how the man had muscled the crate over the curb and up the steppingstone path to the door alone. There wasn't a van or truck at the curb either.

"An heirloom?" Richard said. "I'm not expecting anything like that."

"It's an inheritance," the man said, and flourished a clipboard. "You're Richard Selfry, yes?" He flipped over a page. "Your mother was Veronica Mitchell-Selfry? Her mother was Jessica Klein-Mitchell? And her mother was Melody Kuberski? I realize they didn't all hyphenate, of course, that wasn't the fashion, but it's important to keep track of the maiden names, all the way back sixteen generations to Mary Cooper, and her husband, long may he rot in the grave."

"Um," Richard said, choosing to fasten on the parts of that he'd understood. "Great Grandma Melody, yes, I remember her. This is from her?"

The man beamed his bloody beneficence, but didn't answer. Bad gums as well, he looked like an English butler from a film based on a P.G. Wodehouse novel, solicitous and buttoned-down. "There, it's settled. This is yours, passed down through all the long generations of your family, held in trust by my, hmm, firm for the past sixteen generations. Returned at last to hands that can wield it."

BY TIM PRATT ILLUSTRATION BY ROB JOHNSON

"Do I need to sign something?" Richard said. He wanted to get this man off his steps as soon as possible. Bev would be back with their son Tyler soon, and Ty sometimes got cranky around strangers. There was no telling how he'd react to a grinning bloody-toothed man in a suit.

"Not at all necessary. This goes beyond names, Mr. Selfry, and into the blood. I will, however, take a moment to go over the provenance with you."

"Provenance?" Richard perked up. When he'd heard "heirloom" he'd thought of tarnished silver, china too delicate to use, the sort of things you felt obligated to keep on a shelf somewhere, but secretly resented for taking up space. But "provenance" was a classy word, and maybe it meant this inheritance was something valuable. "What is it, exactly?"

"It is an axe, Mr. Selfry," the man said. He produced a prybar—from where, Richard wasn't sure—and, with a great squealing and popping of nails, pried the lid off the crate. Richard left the safety of the doorway and went out onto the porch just as the man set the lid aside. Peering into the crate, Richard saw only darkness, as if the box were full of ink, but then something glinted silver, and—as if his eyes were adjusting to a moonlit night, instead of midafternoon sun—he saw the great silver crescent of an axehead, nestled among styrofoam packing peanuts that were, inexplicably, black instead of white. It was a double-bladed axe, with a long three-sided pyramidal spike emerging from the top.

"Workmanship," the man said approvingly. "Look at the blood-gutters on that spike. It's not as if the spike was ever likely to be used for stabbing, but the smith allowed for the possibility. Truly, they were giants on the earth in those days."

> "This is the great axe of fearsome heft, its name cried out in pain and fear in all the dark places of the world. That name is now forgotten, erased from the history of the race it tried to vanquish..."

"I don't understand," Richard said. "This thing is a family heirloom? From Great Grandma Melody? It doesn't even look old."

"The shaft has been replaced a time or two, I wager, though the current one is several hundred years old. But the head, ah, it will stand the test of time. You could shear leptons in two with that blade, if the need arose."

"Lepers?" Richard said.

"Moving along," the man said, referring again to his clipboard. He cleared his throat. "The provenance: This is the great axe of fearsome heft, its name cried out in pain and fear in all the dark places of the world. That name is now forgotten, erased from the history of the race it tried to vanquish, and no longer known to any living thing. This great axe passed from father to son, from uncle to nephew, from cousin to cousin, always to the nearest male relative—I know, terribly sexist, but this was a long time ago, and the smith something of a chauvinist—until a curse was laid upon that line of men, that no male child should be born to them unto fifteen generations. And so, when the axe fell from the dying hands of the last man of that line, it lay in the dust until its enemies took it up to destroy it. But the blade would not break, or bend, or burn, and so it has been held in trust, in a place of disgrace that upon by its enemies, to someday be given back to the first male born of that accursed line." The man glanced up. "That's you. We wish should have brought it to you on your fifteenth birthday, but frankly we were busy, and might have left the axe in storage forever if it hadn't started keening. Foul thing. It must have smelled your blood and testosterone, even over all that distance. Anyway, it's yours now, the bane of my race, an antique. Good luck with it." The man gave a little salute and began to walk away.

"Wait," Richard said, looking up from the dazzling gleam of the axe. "What are you talking about? A curse?"

The man paused. "You were the first boy born in fifteen generations, weren't you? Aren't you blessed with aunts and great-aunts and great great aunts ad infinitum?"

"I have uncles," Richard said, and then frowned. "But all by marriage, I guess."

The man shrugged. "It was a good curse. You have the great axe again. Enjoy. I'm sure it will fly through firewood like nobody's business."

"I don't think this was meant for cutting wood," Richard said, and began to reach for the weapon. He hesitated before touching it, with the oddest idea that just getting close to that edge could be enough to make him bleed.

"No," the man said. "It's meant for fighting a war. But that war has been over for almost four centuries, Mr. Selfry, when your last male ancestor fell on the battlefield, and there was no one left to take up arms in his place. You're living in the postwar world, and you're blessed with sufficient ignorance to live without the knowledge of your circumstances." He doffed his stained hat and bowed, revealing the top of his head, which oozed blood, and squirmed, as if his hairs were tiny worms, or tentacles. He strode off across the yard and down the sidewalk and soon vanished from sight. Richard gaped after him, thinking, *It must be a skin disease, some scalp condition, what else could it be?*

Richard looked at the axe. He wondered what Bev would think of it.

"I'M NOT SURE I WANT THAT THING IN OUR HOUSE."

"Don't be silly," Bev said, crouching by the fireplace, where the axe leaned against the bricks. The shaft was over a yard long, the head gleaming in the soft lamplight. The Selfrys had a cozy, book filled living room, done up in dark wood and occasional flashes of brass, with a scattering of colors from Tyler's plastic toys on the floor. "It's beautiful!" She touched the polished wood of the axe handle.

"You don't work in an emergency room, Bev. I do. I've seen people come in with their legs gashed by chainsaws, people who've chopped their toes off with shovels. This thing is dangerous."

"I'm not saying we should keep it under Ty's pillow," she said, rising. "Or even put it anywhere he can reach it. We'll keep it in the bedroom, maybe hang it on the wall."

"I'm not sure the whole Viking warrior look will go with our furnishings. And besides, you know Ty, he can't pick up a stick without pretending it's a sword, or a banana without using it like a gun. How are we going to keep him away from this thing?"

"The same way we keep him away from your porn and my vibrator, Richard—by having a lock on our door. Besides, the whole everything's-a-weapon thing is typical, he's a four-year-old. He'll get over it. And he didn't even look at the axe twice when we came home, just went to the TV room to watch cartoons."

"Maybe we can just sell the thing." Richard had told Bev the axe was an heirloom, though he'd left out the details about the delivery man's bloody mouth, and the bizarre "provenance." "It's supposed to be old."

Bev turned on him, frowning, which surprised him—she was an antique dealer, and had a habit of calculating the possible sale price of pretty much any old object they encountered. "Bite your tongue! It's a family heirloom, Richard, you said so yourself. This will belong to Ty someday."

He held up his hands. "Okay, okay. We'll keep it in the bedroom. But not hanging over the bed, please. If there was an earthquake, and that thing fell on us, we'd be chopped to bits."

Bev rolled her eyes and tried to pick up the axe. She grunted, wrapped both hands around the handle, strained, then gave up. "Jesus, Richard, how did you even get that thing in the house? It weighs a ton!"

"Ah," Richard said, a ball of cold growing in his gut. Bev was no weakling—she hauled furniture in and out of trucks on a fairly regular basis—and Richard had lifted the axe without any trouble at all. He'd even wondered what kind of metal the axehead could be made out of, to be so big, and yet so light. Holding the axe had been . . . well . . . fun, and the desire to go swinging it at trees and mailboxes had been a powerful one. He'd resisted, because he was a grown-up with a wife and son and job, and grown-ups didn't do crap like that. "The delivery guy helped me. But I can move it into the bedroom."

"I guess hanging it up won't work," she said. "The weight would rip the studs right out of the wall."

Richard lifted the axe with a great show of effort, and took it to the bedroom.

AFTER A 12 HOUR NURSING SHIFT AT THE HOSPITAL, AND A particularly rough one at that, Richard came home in the morning and collapsed into bed. Ty was in day care, and Bev was in the next county at an auction, so the house was blessedly silent. His schedule was good in some ways—he often got four day weekends, which was good for spending time with his son, and with Bev, who had a very flexible schedule—but working two or three shifts in a row tended to wipe him out, especially as he got older. Now that he was in bed, though, sleep didn't come; he was physically tired, but not sleepy, and his mind ticked along steadily. Thinking about the man who'd brought the axe. Thinking about the weird black styrofoam peanuts that had melted into thin, oily residue when he began scooping them into the garbage can. Trying not to think about the axe, leaning upside down over in the corner, the spike on top digging into the carpet. The gleaming blades.

How strangely good holding the weapon felt. He closed his eyes, and after a time, he slept. When he woke some hours later, the axe was on the floor by the bed, his arm hanging off the edge of the mattress, his fingers gently touching the handle.

"Oh, hell," he said, but he didn't jerk his hand away.

TY AND RICHARD PLAYED IN THE YARD THAT AFTERNOON. Ty had blond hair—as Richard and Bev both had, as children, though theirs had darkened as they aged—and a ready smile. He held a plastic sword in both hands and made little explosive sounds with his mouth as he swung it, as if the sword were somehow capable of blowing up whatever he struck. Richard had to make do with a sword made from Tinkertoys, and they fenced around the yard. Richard wanted to enroll Ty in a martial arts class to channel his energy and desire to hit things, but Bev was resistant, insisting that his love for all things fighting-related would pass. And it was true, Ty seemed to love books as much as he loved kicking imaginary ninjas, though he couldn't really read yet. So Richard supposed she might be right. He'd spent a lot of time fighting imaginary ninjas himself as a child, after all, and he'd wound up going into nursing, which was about as far from ninja-fighting as it was possible to get.

"I chopped off your head!" Ty crowed, though he hadn't even come close, really.

"Ouch, my head!" Richard cried. "What will I do without a head? How will I brush my hair?"

"It's okay," Ty said. "I'll help you put your head back on later."

LATER THAT YEAR, AFTER WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE BURGLAR, Bev agreed to let Richard move the axe into the attic. The thief hadn't been hurt, but he'd been terrified, and the police found him huddled on the front steps of the Selfry house, weeping. A detective told Richard the man wouldn't even touch a plastic knife to cut his food anymore, and that he wouldn't shave, even with a safety razor. "The doc says it's called aichmophobia," the detective said. "Fear of knives, needles, sharp things, whatever. You must have scared the ever-loving shit out of that guy."

Sitting on the couch, Bev holding his hand, Richard shook his head. He didn't remember much at all about that night, not even hearing a noise, certainly not picking up the axe and creeping into the living room and finding the burglar. He just remembered standing in the front doorway, the axe in his hand, the thief cowering at his feet . . . and the fact that he'd felt no urge at all to bring the axe down and kill the man. He'd sensed, somehow, that it would be inappropriate—that the axe hadn't been made for killing people, but something else entirely. "The axe is just an old family heirloom," he'd said. "I don't even think it's sharp. We don't have a gun or anything though, so when I heard someone in the living room, it was the only thing I could think to pick up. I came in, yelled at him, waved the axe, and he ran off. Maybe the burglar always had that phobia."

The detective snorted. "The guy had a big hunting knife and a switchblade on him when we picked him up, so I think not. But you did good, Mr. Selfry—scared him off, didn't hurt him. Impressed the shit out of the officer who arrived at the scene, too—he said when he saw you standing in the doorway, holding that axe, you looked like some kind of crazy medieval superhero."

Richard felt obscurely pleased. "I just did what anyone would do," he said.

AS RICHARD CHECKED IVS AND HANDED OUT MEDS AT THE hospital, his lower back ached from the hours on his feet, he began to think about the axe. As a boy, he'd had the usual superhero fantasies, imagining powers, enemies, epic battles. He would save his mother from kidnappers. He would help his father fight off a great horned beast from the woods behind the house. For a while as a boy, Richard had imagined that he could make the wind blow just by willing it, and he'd sat high in the branches of a tree and imagined summoning tornadoes to destroy the homes of the wealthy bullies who tormented him at school. Now, walking through the hospital, thinking of the gleam and heft of the nameless great axe, he had those fantasies again, though he had no real enemies anymore. The bloody man who'd brought the axe had talked as if the weapon were part of a mission, and that was an attractive thought, too, wasn't it? How simple it would be, to have a clear purpose and a weapon made to achieve it, instead of the muddle of goals and obligations that came with adult life—to maintain his with Bev, to have sex with her at least once a week, to make sure Ty grew up loving and trusting them and became a good person, to keep the cars maintained, to keep the plants watered, to keep up the mortgage payments, to make sure the bills were paid and their credit rating remained robust. Richard had problems, of course, but they weren't the sort of problems that could be solved by swinging an axe at them.

THE YEAR TYLER TURNED FIVE, RICHARD MOVED THE AXE OUT of the attic, into the garden shed, one day while Bev and Ty were out. The blade had started whispering to him through the ceiling of the house, and while he was somewhat worried he was going insane, he thought it more likely the axe really was whispering. At first, the words had been incomprehensible, but as night followed night they became more and more like English, and he was afraid soon he might understand what the axe was saying.

Standing in the backyard, the axe resting easy in his hand as always, Richard swung the weapon experimentally at the empty air between the hammock and the gas grill.

A thin bright gash appeared in the air, as if he'd cut through canvas, and beyond the rip he glimpsed scudding gray clouds, a hilly landscape dotted with lonesome trees, and a sprawling fortress of gleaming black stone shot with reddish-brown streaks, as if the whole building were made of polished hematite. Richard cried

out and flung the axe away from him, and the gash in the air vanished—or else, his ability to see it did.

Shaking, he went into the shed, pulled on a pair of thick gardening gloves, and picked up the axe. It whispered to him. The only word he could make out was "Go. Go. Go.

Richard wrapped the head of the axe in burlap sacks and stuck it in the corner, back behind the flowerpots, and went inside to wash his hands. Standing at the sink, he decided the back shed wasn't far enough. Heirloom or not, the axe was driving him crazy—or revealing the fundamental, hidden madness of the world—and he needed to get rid of it, and get back to normal.

Otherwise, he might take the axe in hand again, and do what it said. He might just. Go.

RICHARD HAD TO WAIT A FEW WEEKS, BUT IT WASN'T TOO bad—with the axe in the shed, he couldn't hear the whispering, and after the first night, he stopped dreaming of the hematite fortress. Finally Bev went to visit her sister in Mendocino County, to let Ty play with his cousins for a couple of days, and Richard said he couldn't go because of work. That evening he took the axe, still wrapped in its sacks, and put it in the trunk of their beat-up backup car, a little two-door Corolla with bucket seats from their pre-Tyler days. He drove a few miles north to a state park that was closed for the night and stopped by the side of the road. He took the axe and the shovel—the shovel felt much heavier than the axe—and stepped over the closed gate at the park entrance, guided by the light of a headlamp on an elastic band around his head. After following the path through redwoods for a few hundred yards, he cut off into the trees, down a sloping hill, until he found a likely spot near a creek. He dug a hole, and tried to shake off feelings of guilt as the pile of soil grew. It wasn't like he was burying a body. He was burying an axe, something he hadn't wanted in the first place, something that had saved his house from being robbed, sure, but had stolen his peace of mind in the process.

Richard dropped the axe in its shallow grave, covered it with dirt, kicked leaves over the whole thing, and went back to his car. He'd expected to feel relief, and there was some of that, but there was also anxiety, as if he'd thrown away something he might someday need.

RICHARD REELED, AND GRABBED HOLD OF THE WOODEN table in the garden shed to catch his balance. His head pounded, and he couldn't understand how he'd gotten here. He'd been in bed, just a moment before, and—

The axe. It leaned in the corner of the shed, double-edged head gleaming. Gleaming, in the sunlight that filtered through cracks in the wall. Daylight? How? He'd buried the axe—come home, gone to bed—and now the axe was back. Like something from a horror story, something you could never be rid of, a cursed object you could throw away, only to have it show up on your step again the next day, magically returned.

Except... not magically. Richard was hungry. His boots were dirty. His watch said it was nine in the morning.

He'd gone back to get the axe. He'd sleepwalked, sleep-drove, sleep-dug, sleep-drove home again. Gone into a fugue state, returned to the park, dug up the axe, and brought it home.

Use me, the axe whispered. *The war is not done. Our enemies yet live. Take arms. Take arms. Go. Go. Go.*

Richard fled into the house.

HE THOUGHT ABOUT RENTING A BOAT AND DROPPING THE axe in the middle of the bay. But he was afraid he'd somehow manage to sleep-scuba-dive and retrieve it. So instead he took a steamer trunk from the attic, placed the axe inside—it fit, barely, when he put it in diagonally—wrapped the trunk in chains and rope, and shoved it in the back of the shed, where he piled a sack of peat moss and some flower pots on top. The whispering was muffled, now, and he wouldn't be able to hear it at all once he shut the shed door.

"I'm sorry," he said, standing in the doorway. "If I'd gotten you when I was a teenager, when they were supposed to bring you to me, maybe I'd be able to do what you want. But I have a wife, I have a son, I have responsibilities. It's not my war."

The axe whispered something in response, but Richard couldn't make it out, and instead of stepping closer and listening hard, he stepped out, and shut the door.

THE YEAR TY TURNED EIGHT—THIRD GRADE, CURSIVE WRITING, multiplication tables, soccer practice after school—Bev confessed to Richard that she'd been cheating on him for the past six months with an antique dealer she'd met at an estate sale.

Richard sat on the couch with his head in his hands. Ty was in Mendocino with his aunt, sent away by his mother so she could have this conversation. "Do you want out, Bev?" he said. Is that it?

Bev sat in a chair across the room, probably because she knew Richard didn't respond well to closeness or touch in tense situations. Ty was the same way, and hated being touched when he was upset. "It's not that, Richard. It's just... I don't know if I can explain it. Taking Ty to soccer practice in our mini van, I realized I'd become one of those women—you know? That I was older, that I had responsibilities, that... you remember how it used to be, we'd go off on weekends to Santa Cruz on a whim, we'd take road trips to Las Vegas and gamble, we'd spend whole weekends in bed."

"But it hasn't been like that for years," Richard said, unable to look at her, staring at the carpet. "Since we had Ty, we've had to settle down. God, Bev, it's called being a grown-up, you know? You make choices, trade-offs."

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry, Richard. It's just... I really felt it this year, felt my youth slipping away. I wanted to feel beautiful again. I wanted to be something other than a mom. I wanted to have an adventure."

An adventure, Richard thought, and the axe was there, in his mind. Maybe he'd like an adventure—to cut a gash in the air, step through, and do something decisive and violent, the sort of thing relegated to daydreams and video games. To wield a great fucking magical axe against monsters with bloody teeth. It was an opportunity no one in the world even had, except for him, but he'd put his marriage, his responsibilities, his adulthood first. Part of him thought, *You were just afraid. Bev wasn't afraid.* But it wasn't fear. He feared nothing when he held the axe, except the possibility of losing the things he loved.

"Maybe I should go have a fucking adventure, then," he said, and now he did look at her, at her tear-streaked face, which was still beautiful. She wasn't even forty yet. "Yeah? How would that be?"

"If you wanted to sleep with someone else, I wouldn't blame you," she said quietly, and Richard laughed out loud.

"No," he said. "No, that's not what I meant at all."

HE WENT INTO THE SHED, AND SAT BY THE AXE, AND LISTENED to it whisper for a while. But the next day Ty came home, and he could tell there was something wrong between his parents, and Richard picked him up, and played some video games with him, and made his choice to stay once more.

That night, as he got ready for bed, Bev said, "I'm sorry, Richard. It will never happen again. I mean it."

Richard thought for a while. He still loved her. And, though it twisted him up and hurt him badly, he did understand her desires. He'd felt them himself, in a different direction. "Okay," he said. He thought, in time, they'd get back to being the way they used to be.

THEY PROBABLY WOULD HAVE GOTTEN PAST IT, TOO, IF BEV hadn't been struck and killed by a car while crossing the street a week later.

TY WAS WITH HIS AUNT. THE DAY AFTER THE FUNERAL, because Richard had wanted some time alone. He sat in the garden shed, with the trunk open, chains scattered, the axe gleaming before him. "You can help me find him," Richard said. The driver had hit-

and-run, and the police were investigating. There were witnesses, but no one had gotten the license plate number, and there were a lot of red Hondas in the world. But Richard thought the axe could help.

Yes, the axe whispered.

"We can find him, and cut him into pieces for killing my wife," Richard said.

I am not made for killing men, the axe said. But if you promise to take up arms against our enemies, I will help you kill this man. I will make that bargain.

Richard blinked tears from his eyes. "But .. Ty."

I will pass to him when you fall in battle, the axe said.

Ty. Eight years old. Bewildered, lost, broken. He'd only just begun to comprehend death, and now his mother was dead. If his father disappeared, too ..

"I ... no," Richard said. "I'm sorry." He put the axe in its trunk, closed the lid, chained it up, put it away, and cried, and cried, and cried.

THE DRIVER WHO KILLED BEV WAS NEVER FOUND.

RICHARD CHANGED HIS LIFE. HE DEVOTED HIMSELF completely to his son. He adjusted his schedule—which was possible, given his many years in the job—so that he could have his nights and weekends free to be a father. His sister-in-law offered to take Ty for the summers, encouraged Richard to date, but he refused. His son grew older, did passably well in school, became interested in sports, and eventually in girls. He had friends over to stay the night, went on field trips, had a boyhood. Around the time he turned thirteen,

> How to explain to a fifteen-year-old boy that fear hadn't motivated him at all, that he'd longed to take up the axe and step into the gash in the air, that he'd stayed for different reasons altogether?

he became private, short-tempered, snappish, and Richard worried that he was into drugs, or hanging out with the wrong crowd, but his sister-in-law reassured him. "My daughter Gwen went through the same thing," she said. "My little Bobby will, too, I'm sure, once he gets older. It's a hard age. Ty's figuring out how to be his own person, testing the boundaries, all that. It'll pass."

"I'm afraid he hates me," Richard said.

"You just try to be a good dad, and do what you know is right," she said. "And someday, when he's older, he'll understand. And even if he doesn't ... it doesn't matter, you know? All that matters is that you raise him right, as best you can. We give up everything for our kids, and when they grow up, they never call or visit enough." She laughed. "Just like we did with our parents, right?"

And Richard had to laugh.

TYLER SPENT MORE AND MORE TIME AWAY FROM HOME, visiting friends, going to the mall. Sometimes it seemed like the house was just a place where he ate and slept. Richard spent some of his free time visiting Bev's grave, but mostly he sat out in the garden shed, and talked to the axe. "When Ty goes off to college, I'll do it," he said. The axe murmured at him. Richard had thought it all through. He'd sign everything over to Ty, the house, the cars, the bank accounts, all of it. He'd pick up the axe, slash the air, and step through to the world of that hematite fortress. Some people retired and moved to Florida. Richard would retire and move to Narnia, or Mordor, or Oz, or whatever that place beyond the world was. When he held the axe, the ache in his back would disappear. He would feel the way he'd felt, standing over the burglar—like a man of power, like a man of purpose, like a defender of right and true. Maybe he'd leave Ty a note, explaining, telling him about the axe, warning him, or promising him, that it would be his someday. Or, better, Richard could return, triumphant, the war won, and tell his son stories of the family's glory. Surely, beyond that gash in the air, Richard would finally learn the truth about his history, about the war the men of his family had waged, about their enemy.

"Just a few more years," he told the axe. "You've waited fifteen generations. What's a few more years?"

The axe neither agreed nor disagreed, it only murmured, even as Richard spoke, as if it wasn't even talking to him.

"TY!" RICHARD CALLED, KICKING HIS SHOES OFF INSIDE THE front door. "I brought home Indian food." Ty was fifteen—it was his birthday, though he wasn't having a party until Saturday—and he and Richard were starting to get along better these days. They shared a mutual love for a violent cop show about a wisecracking anti-hero, and every Thursday night they ate Indian food or Chinese or cheeseburgers and watched it together. Richard had come to look forward to those nights more than anything.

Ty didn't answer. Richard went into the kitchen, set down the bags of take-out, and saw that the back door was ajar.

Richard realized what had happened at once, and rushed out the door.

Ty stood in the backyard, a bulging backpack on his shoulders, the great nameless axe in his hands. A shimmering rip in the air hovered before him, showing a glimpse of the hills, the trees, the clouds. It was raining in that other world, and Richard thought, fearfully, that Ty didn't even have a raincoat or an umbrella.

"Ty," he said.

Tyler turned, looked at his father, and sighed. "Sorry, Dad. I was hoping to be gone before you got here. I left a note on your pillow."

"Son, you don't know what you're doing." Richard approached him slowly, as he would a feral cat he hoped to rescue. "Please, come in, let's talk about this."

Tyler looked at him with open scorn. "The axe told me, Dad. It told me how you were afraid to use it, how you wouldn't even go after the guy who killed mom, how you tried to bury it. But I'm not scared. I know there's a war. I'm going."

Richard opened his mouth, and closed it again. How to explain to a fifteen-year-old boy that fear hadn't motivated him at all, that he'd longed to take up the axe and step into the gash in the air, that he'd stayed for different reasons altogether? "It wasn't like that, Ty."

But Tyler shook his head, and as he spoke, his voice broke, and he started crying. "All this time, you never told me about the axe, that I had a destiny, that I could be doing something important, because you were so afraid. But I'm not afraid, I'm not like you, I'm going."

Richard thought about how to explain. To tell Ty he'd stayed for him, all for him. But he was a kid, and kids were selfish, and kids tended to ascribe selfish motives to others. Richard had been the same way as a teenager, hadn't he? Only he hadn't had a magical axe, and a purpose. "Be safe, Ty," he said. He couldn't believe he was saying it. He wanted to tackle his son, hold him down, take the axe away from him. But it was too late for all that. He'd done the best he could, tried to raise his son right, and now, in the eyes of the axe, Tyler was all grown up. Or grown up enough, anyway. "Come back, when you can, and let me know you're okay."

Ty looked confused, as if he'd expected an argument, and Richard heard the axe murmuring

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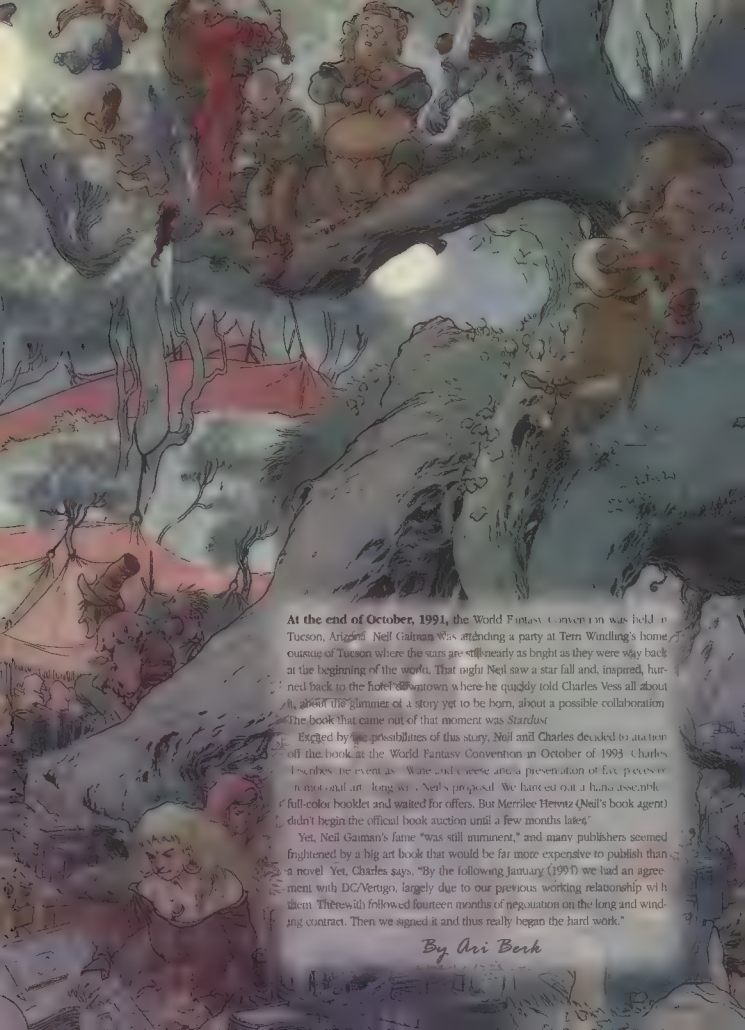
Back Over the Wall

CHARLES VESS REVISITS THE WORLD OF STARDUST

Every Nine Years There Is a Market



At the end of October, 1991, the World Fantasy Convention was held in Tucson, Arizona. Neil Gaiman was attending a party at Terri Windling's home outside of Tucson where the stars are still nearly as bright as they were way back at the beginning of the world. That night Neil saw a star fall and, inspired, hurried back to the hotel downtown where he quickly told Charles Vess all about it, about the glimmer of a story yet to be born, about a possible collaboration. The book that came out of that moment was *Stardust*.

Excited by the possibilities of this story, Neil and Charles decided to auction off the book at the World Fantasy Convention in October of 1993. Charles describes the event as "Wine and cheese and a presentation of five pieces of framed original art—long with Neil's proposal. We hand-colored a full-color booklet and waited for offers. But Merrilee Heifetz (Neil's book agent) didn't begin the official book auction until a few months later."

Yet, Neil Gaiman's fame "was still imminent," and many publishers seemed frightened by a big art book that would be far more expensive to publish than a novel. Yet, Charles says, "By the following January (1993) we had an agreement with DC/Vertigo, largely due to our previous working relationship with them. Therewith followed fourteen months of negotiation on the long and winding contract. Then we signed it and thus really began the hard work."

By Ari Berk

The Village of Wall

All was going well. Indeed, after the project was formally begun, Charles had a dream that the Great God Pan was smiling down at him. A falling star, the nod from a god: auspicious, wondrous omens attended this project, but even so, a working artist is constrained by many things. Time chief among them. Concept paintings needed to be done before any substantive texts were written.

So it began like this: The story was written and published in 48-page serialized sections. Thus it was truly a tale that unfolded in the telling; Neil would call Charles and read the newest installments over the phone. This was a process of accommodation as well as collaboration with Charles and Neil each making changes, dropping this and adding that, as the book was written and illustrated along the way.

Some drawn characters never made it into the story, such as in the drawing of the three Lilum, one leaning on the picture frame of a painted forest scene depicting Tristan and Yvaine standing together, their path being blocked by a long armed tree person. The tree person wasn't able to wander into the story proper, so what it thinks of Tristan and Yvaine remains a mystery. This picture was inspired by several days spent sculpting a tree out of actual tree parts (bark and ivy, as well as tons of hot glue, all wrapped around very heavy sculpture wire) in Alan Lee's studio/courtyard.

The sections began being published in 1997 and the book was published in 1999. Yet even after it was finished, Charles felt dissatisfied with some of his previous paintings. There remained things he did n't have time to do previously, or felt he didn't get quite right. Over the years since its completion, Charles has continued to engage with and imagine this world.

Title Page

Tristan Thorn is rescued by the Lilum

A Forest of Trees

Every illustration project involves making hard choices: what to draw, what to leave to the imagination, what might be accomplished under pressing deadlines. There were also a number of "lost moments" that Charles really wanted to depict. The imminent release of the Paramount film has led to the publication of a new hardcover edition, thus providing Charles with the opportunity to revisit and reconsider some of his initial artistic interpretations.

So here, Gentle Reader, is the first peek at Charles Vess's return to Wall.

Go and Catch a Falling Star

This painting is the chosen cover image for the new hardcover edition. It was conceived this last summer when Charles was in England visiting the *Stardust* movie set and he learned a new edition was to be brought out. It was an intensely inspiring environment: portions of sets, painted scenes, actors, costumes, another kind of magic world. The muse was upon him! Charles asked if he could go to the art department and sketch. Surrounded by more art, he began drawing on a large sheet of paper. Very large. So large it wouldn't fit in his suit case. Fortunately, the Art Department was able to scan it and transform it into bits and bytes, turning it into a CD at the other end of the process. That way he could take it home and complete the painting. In the meantime, Vess asked Neil who might like the original drawing as a gift. They decided to give it to Claire Danes, the actress playing Yvaine. Many sincere thanks and hugs ensued.

Every Nine Years There Is a Market

This new painting is Charles's second version of the big faerie market, the first having been done well before any text was written. In this one, Tristan and Yvaine have been added to the picture. "In a big scene, you can have a lot of fun, can add a lot," Charles noted, recalling an inspiring picture on the wall of his childhood dental office: a huge poster of fairyland, filled with details culled from rhyme and lore. Understandably eager for distraction, Charles would wander through it in his mind, walking the paths of wonder through tales he knew and places he would come to know. With this experience in mind, he approached the new version of the market. He wanted this picture to provide the same experience for viewers: a place they could return to again and again, each time finding something new, something wondrous and delightful.

Look closely, for here is a "Waldo" of the fantastic. Gandalf is in there. Charles and his wife Karen and a friend are also there in a booth. Look closely and find a character or two from two of Charles's favorite Miyazaki films, *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Returning characters from the first version of the painting were invited to wander the market stalls again, such as the old bookseller woman, for example. She has moved up in the hierarchy of the marketplace in the new painting, now occupying the place of privilege in among the tree roots. Neil and his daughter Maddy are perusing her book stall. Some folk from Hausman's illustrations for *The Goblin Market* make an appearance. *The Little Hairy Man* (though he didn't make it into the movie) idles about the market in good company. Several children stroll in from an illustrated postcard Charles owns (a gift from Terri Windling) with the art of Quint Buchholz.

Charles's approach to the market is also informed by practicality. Since the market is present for a day and a night, it can have no permanent structures. So each stall must be built of easily transportable

parts and things found in situ. Trying to make it all work realistically was a big part of the fun for Vess.

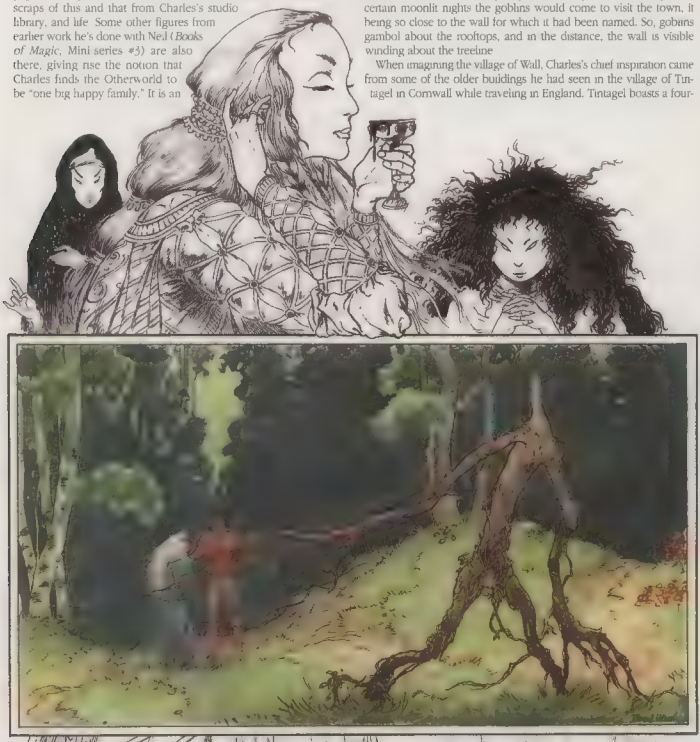
Both the original and this new version take place at dusk, the most magical and liminal time of the day, reflecting a general folkloric belief that Faerie exists in between other moments and is accessible at places neither here nor there, at thresholds: just over the wall, on the strand, at dawn or dusk, in the moment of the tale's telling, in the quiet gaze of viewers considering the painting unfolding before them.

In this version, the faerie market has become informed by the wondrous clutter of Charles's head, seen here tipped out onto the page. It is replete with references to friends, admired artists, and scraps of this and that from Charles's studio, library, and life. Some other figures from earlier work he's done with Neil (*Books of Magic*, Mini-series #3) are also there, giving rise the notion that Charles finds the Otherworld to be "one big happy family." It is an especial treat when you can view a painting and feel like you've just had a lovely long chat with the artist.

The Village of Wall

In a few cases, Charles was a bit disappointed with his first take at representing some of Neil's descriptions. When Neil spoke to Charles initially of the village of Wall, he called it "an ancient village of stones all leaning into each other in a vain attempt to defeat time and gravity." Charles found his initial pictures too "staid and upright," so when he returned to this subject, he went skyward, allowing the town to become more vertical and precipitous. Perhaps, Charles thought, on certain moonlit nights the goblins would come to visit the town, it being so close to the wall for which it had been named. So, goblins gambol about the rooftops, and in the distance, the wall is visible winding about the treeline.

When imagining the village of Wall, Charles's chief inspiration came from some of the older buildings he had seen in the village of Tintagel in Cornwall while traveling in England. Tintagel boasts a four-



teenth-century post office. The roof line of this and other old buildings there ripple, bend, and sag under the weight of years and of the stone slate roofs so common in that county. Capped by such roofs, the teetering houses of Wall give a sense of age and oddness, of tenacity and community: ideal elements for a town that stands on the border of Faerie.

A Mighty Storm

Sometimes there is something you really want to draw just because. For Charles, flying galleons. Years ago, Charles had seen this theme done very well in a book by William Timlin, *The Ship That Sailed to Mars*, and he's wanted to paint a flying ship since then. Also, Charles likes to draw and paint dramatic skies, a subject very well suited to his fondness for ink paints. He wanted to give this piece a Jules Verne feel, and has built drama through the use of lightning and the tall rocks jutting dangerously like reefs into the sky.

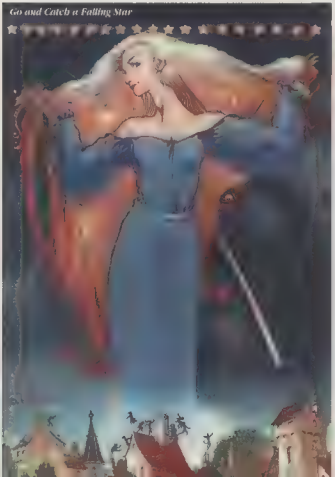
The Forest of Berenhed

Halfway through the book, Neil mentions various adventures (in brief paragraphs) that weren't elaborated in great detail, and Charles thought it would be fun to visualize one of them. Here Tristan fights the eagle, not with conventional (and likely useless) weapons but instead with his wits. He is depicted roping it in, letting the tree bear the force of the eagle's strength.

Unavoidably Detained by the World

From a small paragraph near the end of the book, a mere suggestion of a moment (sometimes the most fun), Charles depicts Tristan and Yvaine arriving in the town of Cloudsrange, "in the lower reaches of Stormhold proper," where they will spend the night at the Inn. There they will discuss their preference to keep to the road and see something more of the kingdom, instead of returning home to rule. They send a note home to Tristan's mother asking her to continue watching over the kingdom, telling her, "We have been unavoidably detained by the world."

Charles's illustration was influenced by an obscure British artist


Go and Catch a Falling Star

My Sisters and I Would Sing

Sidney H. Sime, a favorite illustrator of Lord Dunsany (himself one of Neil Gaiman's favorite authors). Indeed, they got along so well that Dunsany commissioned from Sime ten illustrations and then went on to write stories to the art. This resulted in the book *Time and the Gods*.

We see Charles reveling in the scale here: small figures in a large landscape, making the world seem wider, more eminent, more invitational. Just a few steps more and you're out of town and in the realm of adventure that awaits any folk who are brave enough to step across the threshold. Indeed, here Tristan and Yvaine wander toward us, toward (and soon to venture beyond) the boundary of the picture frame. Charles's delight in this kind of scale (a trait he shares with Alan Lee) suggests, I believe, a sincere love of place, a desire to wander (with us) into the worlds he depicts.

My Sisters and I Would Sing

Even when the characters are large and at the fore, the ink hues, shadows, light play, and perspectives draw us beyond them, up the path, into the woods, and into the faraway.

Near the end of the book, Tristan and Yvaine are on their way back to Wall when they begin to figure out they quite like each other. Tristan hears music. Yvaine is sitting alone, singing and enraptured, looking up into the sky to her lost sisters who are the infinite stars. She longs for their company and perhaps for her former celestial home. Charles wanted to make this a moonlit scene, filled with night creatures that would come to hear the singer's voice. Charles depicts the night-forest time-stopped in song, a mythic moment full of love and longing, and we, like Tristan, like the other night-folk, are there too. We rise, with the subtle hues of the vision, into the firmament above the boughs.

In looking through this portfolio of new works, it becomes clear that we are being encouraged to look up, for Charles's depictions draw

Continued on page 98

time tells all

Not everyone wants happiness, but you just can't fight fate...

By Way Jeng Illustration by David Leonard

HAPPINESS IS A SHORT REDHEAD WITH GREEN EYES AND A bubbly disposition. Most people guess she's around twenty-three years old. Her sister, Fate, is tall and slim, a little bit older, with blue-black hair down to her waist and a sharp nose. How'd Steve get mixed up with the two of them? You can blame that one on Fate, because it was her idea. I'm not one to gossip, but promise you won't tell the girls and I'll fill you in on the real deal.

Happiness, Fate, and Steve met on a Saturday morning. He might have missed it, because Steve likes to sleep in, but a new Albert Marlowe novel had come out the day before. Steve planned to spend the weekend parked on his couch, reading the latest novel by a schizophrenic whack job with just the right kind of loose marbles to really put the screws to his imaginary people. Instead, he's settling into the couch's ever-elusive comfy spot when he hears a noise. It's a loud thump like somebody dropping something big and heavy, and he goes to see what's going on.

Steve opens his window and sticks his head out, expecting to see a bunch of the neighborhood kids carting around a wagon full of junk to build a fort in the wash out back, but instead he gets a double-barreled eyeful: two girls, both the kind that make guys slip off their wedding rings, dragging boxes out of a U-Haul in front of the house across the street. He wonders when the place went up for sale, but Steve's got no way to know that the old owner made a killing when he cashed in some stock options after a fortuitous analyst upgrade. The girls made an offer on the place the same day, and he bought a condo in Vegas.

Happiness is a friendly girl like none other, and she waves. "Hi, there!" she says. "We're your new neighbors."

Steve's got no idea what to do. With the neighborhood kids he'd toss out any cardboard boxes he thinks the kids might want and yell at 'em to stop making such a ruckus, but this is a whole other kind of fish. He waves, the only polite thing to do, and says, "Hi. I'm Steven."

"Hi, Steve." Happiness says. "It's nice to meet you." Then she bends over and tries to pick up the box at her feet, which looks way too big for one little girl to carry all by herself. But that's fine by Happiness, because she loves the damsel in distress look.

Steve watches her struggle. She's about as effective as a turtle flipped on its back. "Do you need help with that?" he finally asks.

Happiness smiles, says, "That would be great," claps her hands, the whole thing.

Now Steve doesn't mind helping that much, but the smile on his face when he stepped out the door was as fake as cold fusion. Next thing Steve knows, he's playing pack mule while Fate tells him where to dump their junk. Dishes, chairs, trunks full of clothes. He moves 'em all without ever complaining while Happiness watches. Don't that beat all?

Happiness introduces herself, then tells him that Fate's her older sister. Steve misses the cross look on Fate's face. He laughs and says, "Happiness and Fate?"

"Our mom was a hippie," Fate says before Happiness can clue him in on the truth.

David Pennard

"No kidding?" Steve asks. He's such a chump.

"Thank you for the help," Fate says after it's all over. "We appreciate it."

Steve nods. The girls don't own that much heavy stuff, but his back hurts all the same. "Not a problem. Glad to help," he says. "I'll see you around. Welcome to the neighborhood."

"No, wait! You can't go yet," Happiness says.

Steve stops and says, "You girls need something else?"

Happiness looks at Fate, who says, "Why don't you stay for a while? Sit down and talk."

"That's right!" Happiness adds. "I'll make coffee."

Visions of making small talk run through Steve's head. They'll laugh. He'll laugh. It'll be a grand ball on stilts. That's the last thing he wants. "Yeah," he says. "Listen, you girls are welcome, but I have a lot of stuff I need to do."

"Oh. Well, okay." Happiness says. She looks at Fate, who shrugs.

"Great," Steve says. "See you around."

He leaves and closes the door behind him before Happiness can think of an excuse to make him stay.

Fate says, "He's more difficult than I expected."

Happiness shrugs and smiles. "That just means it's more fun," she says.

Fate shoots her sister an exasperated look. "This isn't a game," she says. "The man has a bigger karmic surplus than most people will ever see. He deserves a better life than this."

"Leave it to me," Happiness says. "I know what guys want."

FAST-FORWARD TO THE NEXT FRIDAY NIGHT. STEVE'S DOORBELL rings. He goes to the front of the house, picks up a big salad bowl full of candy, and opens the door. He expects a gaggle of kids jonesing for a sugar buzz, and he gets Happiness decked out in a black-and-white French maid outfit. She's got the starched white apron, the frilly cap nestled in her hair just right, the lace, and everything. The look on his face, sort of a wide-eyed dopey shock, is priceless.

"Trick or treat!" Happiness says. She smiles and sticks out a black-and-orange pail shaped like a pumpkin.

Steve? He doesn't know if it's the trick or treat he's got in front of him. Doesn't really matter, though, because all he can do is stand there and stare. Happiness may be six million years old, but she exfoliates every week. Gives her great skin.

Happiness tilts her head just right and says, "You don't like my costume?"

"No, it's fine," Steve says. Happiness isn't above going after what she wants like a cruise granny eyeing the lobster buffet.

Anyhow, so Happiness says, "Don't I get candy? I want chocolate."

That pops Steve's head out of neutral. "Sure. Take whatever you want," he says, then he pours candy out of the bowl and into her pail. It's a tricky move, but he's had plenty of practice with the kids. That's why they all love him.

Happiness looks at her pail, now overflowing with sugary treats, and pouts. "You didn't give me a single chocolate!" she says. "Don't you have some, even a little?"

Of course Steve's got chocolate. He's got a bag of Hershey bars, plus a bag of peanut butter cups, in the kitchen cupboard. He knows it, and she knows it. But he doesn't know that she knows, so he looks for a way to get out of it.

Then he sees Fate standing at the end of the driveway. She's dressed in a dark blue T-shirt and jeans, but Steve doesn't blame her for not going in costume. The holiday's really for the kids.

"Don't keep your sister waiting," Steve says.

"Oh, it's okay," Happiness says. She turns around and yells, "Fate, Steve's going to give me chocolate. I'll see you back at the house." She turns to him, and what's the guy to do?

Fate shrugs and walks home. Steve and Happiness go into his kitchen. It's a tiny little thing with a plastic table big enough for two if they don't eat that much, a stove that doesn't work anymore, and a microwave oven on its last legs.

Happiness sits at the table, and Steve wonders if he should say something. In her defense, she always makes herself at home without being asked. Hardly anybody minds. Steve can't think of a good way to throw her out, so he looks for the chocolate. Happiness? She checks him out when he turns his back.

"I guess I do have chocolate," Steve says. He turns around and sees Happiness admiring the faded floral design printed on the table. He rips the sack of tiny Hershey bars open and gives Happiness a handful.

Happiness squeals and lets out a, "Yay!"

Steve arches an eyebrow, but he doesn't want to be rude. He says, "No problem. It's just chocolate."

Happiness tears one of the tiny packages open, pops the candy in her mouth, and giggles. "I was really worried that I wouldn't have any friends in the neighborhood. But you're really nice," Happiness says. "I'm so glad we met."

You know that warm, giddy feeling you get when one of the hottest chicks in the universe tries to push your buttons like an eight-year-old who just figured out the awesome power of an elevator control panel? Steve starts getting that feeling. His palms get sweaty and he feels a little hot under the collar, but then his heart starts racing.

Steve stands up. "Okay," he says, "I'm glad you like the chocolate. Take the whole bag. You'd enjoy it more than I would anyway." Then he pushes the bag of candy into Happiness's hands.

Happiness blinks and wonders what's going on. "Oh," she says. "Thanks."

"No, thank you," Steve says. "You're doing me a favor by getting rid of all this candy. I was planning to throw it out and go to bed."

"Go to bed already?" Happiness asks. "It's still early."

"Yeah, well the kids really tucker me out," Steve says. He takes a couple steps to the edge of the kitchen and leans on the archway that leads out to the entry alcove, and even Happiness can take that hint.

"Umm ... thanks again for the chocolate," Happiness says. She stands up and tries her best smile, but Steve doesn't show any signs of giving in.

"Okay. Well, thanks for coming by. I'll see you around," Steve says. Happiness steps out, pretty much because she's too shocked and confused to do anything else. He closes the door before she can recover.

Happiness turns to the door, opens her mouth to say something, and the lights go out. She broods all the way home and plops down on the couch next to Fate. Fate loses her place in the book she's reading right as she gets to the part where the main character learns that choosing to paint with radioactives is slowly killing him as surely as it gives his work uncanny colors, but she's too surprised to get angry. Happiness never comes home early.

"What happened?" Fate asks.

"He threw me out!" Happiness shrieks. Believe me when I say it's not a flattering sound. Happiness turns into a real harpy when she doesn't get her way.

Fate pats Happiness on the shoulder. "I'm sure you're overreacting," she says. "What did he say?"

"He threw me out!" Happiness says again, as if volume makes up for her lack of clarity. She throws her hands in the air, then she starts in on the chocolate.

"Threw you out?" Fate asks. "What do you mean? What did he say?"

Happiness tosses some empty candy wrappers aside and says, "Nothing! He didn't say anything. Why doesn't he like me? Everybody likes me."

"I don't know," Fate says.

At this point Happiness is ready to cry, and nobody's ever made Happiness cry. Fate never saw any of this coming. She doesn't know how to make things right.

"That's it," Fate says. "I was wrong about him. We're going home."

"No!" Happiness says.

Fate does a double take. She's used to petulance, whining, and cajoling, but she's never heard that kind of edge in her sister's voice.

"Why?" Fate asks.

"I like him," Happiness tells her sister

Now Fate, she s skeptical. Not that anybody could blame her She's seen Happiness love guys and leave 'em over the smallest things Trouble at work? Death in the family? Happiness is out the door so fast you swear she never came around in the first place.

"Why?" Fate asks

"He s different. I like him," Happiness says Lame, right? Well, that doesn t make it a lie.

But Fate's all about family, even to a fault "All right," she says to Happiness "I'll talk to him."

And Happiness is all rainbows and sunshine again

STEVE'S DOORBELL CHIMES THE NEXT DAY HE FIGURES IT'S Happiness and pretends he can't hear it. You can imagine how happy that makes Fate, who's standing outside and about as happy as a lemming who just figured out the leader's soft in the skull It's not that Fate demands genuflecting idolatry, but there's no better way to schedule a tax audit than treating her like a leper

Luckily for Steve, Fate's a little more forgiving than her son, Opportunity She rings the bell again Steve looks out his living room window, sees it's her, and the door opens a minute later. He says, "Hi, Fate. Something I can help you with?"

"Happiness forgot to buy tea," Fate says. "Now we're out. Can I trouble you for a teabag?"

Steve's all ready to grab some tea and send Fate on her way, but they both hear a tea kettle whistle before he can say anything There's no way he can get around it, so he says, "Come in. I just put a kettle on."

Fate smiles, a teasing job that makes Steve wonder if he's the unluckiest man on Earth, and she says, "Thank you That's very generous."

The two of them walk into the kitchen Steve takes out a pair of mugs, starts steeping the tea, and sets a mug in front of Fate before taking a seat.

"How are you?" Fate asks

"Fine," he answers. "You?"

Fate says, "I'm doing very well, thank you."

Steve raps his fingers on the table. He says, "Good," and wonders how he can get Fate to leave without offending her. The conversation's about as comfortable as watching dingoes eat a baby

Steve's almost figured out a story about how he's expecting his sick aunt to call with news about his even sicker grandma, when Fate says, "Happiness wanted me to thank you for the chocolate."

"No problem," Steve says. "It was my pleasure."

"Would you like to come to dinner sometime?" Fate asks.

"Dinner?" he asks

"We still have to thank you for helping us move in," Fate says between sips of tea "Happiness said she'd cook."

Steve's not the brightest paint in the store, but he's watched enough TV to know how this is going to turn out. He shows up, Happiness meets him at the door, Fate sneaks out the back

"I don't want to get involved with your sister," Steve says. Not the most polite words that could have come out of his mouth, but even a Soviet judge would give him high marks for dodging sitcom hijinks.

Fate sips her tea and says, "Thanks for telling me I hope you're not planning on asking me to relay the message."

"What?" Steve asks "No, that's why I said it. I don't want any misunderstandings Happiness is a good girl. She's ... Well, you know how she is. I'm not the guy for her, okay? I can't do that to her."

"Do what?" Fate asks

Steve clams up Fate stares at him It's a pretty good statue-imitating contest for a while Finally, he says, "I've got this heart thing."

"What heart thing?" Fate asks, as if she doesn't know. She's pretty good at playing dumb when she wants to.

"My heart broke, so they took some out and replaced it with a lump of cold iron. Some kind of congenital something-or-other," Steve says. It's the truth, if you replace cold iron with a polymer aortic valve "But my heart's in pretty bad shape from all the years before they found the problem I don't know how long I'll live, and the doctors look like they're happier because I don't ask."

Fate waits just long enough to make it look like she's surprised. "You're going to die?" she finally asks.

Steve pushes his teacup around. It's easier than looking Fate in the eye. "Yeah," he says.

"Happiness would understand if you told her," Fate says.

"Yeah, but Happiness .. She's so happy," Steve says. "I couldn't do that to her."

"You're not ebola," Fate says "You don't inflict yourself on people."

"I know," Steve says. "I guess there are just some people I can't tell."

Fate laughs "But it's okay to tell me?" she asks

Steve blushes and stares at his tea. "You're different," he says. "You're stronger I'm not sure what Happiness would say, but I thought you'd be all right. I don't know why. Something about you "

Fate doesn't say anything right away, and who could blame her? It's not easy to tell a guy some people are supposed to die sooner than the rest of us, and that's just how things work. "I'm sorry," she says.

Steve finally looks up "What? No, no, no," he says. "You don't have to feel sorry for me. Listen, I made my peace a long time ago. That's the way the universe works, you know? But girls should stay clear of guys like me. I couldn't forgive myself if I broke somebody's heart," Steve says.

"I'm still learning how to forgive myself after breaking people's hearts." Fate says. "Sometimes I hope it gets easier, and sometimes I hope it hurts more next time."

Steve laughs. He laughs more in the next two minutes than he has in the last two years. "And here I thought I was fatalistic," he says.

The laughter makes Fate uncomfortable. She shifts around in her seat and says, "I'm sorry."

"No, you don't have to be," Steve says "It's better this way I prefer it."

"You're different," he says. "You're ... stronger. I'm not sure what Happiness would say, but I thought you'd be all right. I don't know why. Something about you ..."

Fate rests her chin on her hand and wonders if she's underestimated him this whole time. "Why?" she asks.

"At least I have a clue," Steve tells her. "I have an idea of what the universe's plan for me is, and that's more than most people get. Ignorance is bliss, but it's still ignorance."

"I think too much knowledge hurts people," Fate says.

That starts a talk that lasts all night And when I say talk, I mean in the biblical sense of the word The next thing either of them knows, the sun's peeking over the horizon and they're arguing the finer points of Kantian transcendental logic. Both of them stop and wonder what got them down that road, and neither of 'em knows and it doesn't matter Shame on you if you don't think conversation can be as good as sex Hell, it's better when you do it right

STEVE SPENDS MOST OF THE NEXT COUPLE WEEKS HOLED UP in his house, wondering what he's supposed to do next and feeling a little guilty. He leaves for work and grocery shopping, but otherwise he never so much as looks out the window to see what's going on across the street

For the girls' part, they don't bother him, either Fate's not sure what she wants to do She tells her sister she didn't have any luck

getting Steve to come around. Happiness takes Fate at her word and spends the time making plans of her own.

It all starts Friday night, around ten o'clock. Steve's lying on his bed, trying to read a book, when he hears loud music. It doesn't take a genius to figure out where it's coming from, but he doesn't get up right away. He can't stand the music, but no way does he want to go over there and talk to Happiness until he figures some things out. An hour later, he's ready to tear his hair out. An hour after that, he gets dressed and heads out the door.

Steve walks over to the girls' house, pushes his way past some couples intent on figuring out how long they can neck, and walks through the open front door.

"Hi, hi!" Happiness says as soon as he walks in. She's wearing a green cashmere sweater and brown pants, holding a drink in one hand, and drapes the other around Steve. "You're right on time. Do you want a drink? The keg's in the tub, and there's some ice chests with wine coolers. If you want a mixed drink, the bar's in the kitchen."

"Nothing for me, thanks," Steve says.

The crack of broken glass catches everybody's attention.

"Whoops!" Happiness giggles and puts her hand over her mouth. "I better find out what's going on. Back in a sec!" She shuffles off into the crowd, and Steve loses sight of her.

The sea of unfamiliar faces stretches out in front of Steve. It starts at the front door, swamps the living room, peters out a bit around the kitchen, and a few people lean against the hallway that leads to the bedrooms. Steve doesn't know if anybody's in there, but he decides to believe both rooms have been closed off for a coatroom.

Steve's about to turn and leave when the crowd parts just enough to let him see Fate standing in the corner. She's all alone, but Steve can't figure out why. Fate's not the flashiest girl he's ever met, but even in a purple shirt and jeans she's the prettiest girl at the party. She looks up and catches his gaze. He walks over and leans against the wall next to her.

"My sister's idea," Fate tells Steve before he can ask. "I'm sorry. I tried to talk her out of it, but there's no changing her mind when she gets an idea stuck in her head."

"I didn't ask for any of this," Steve says.

Fate shrugs and says, "You should be flattered."

Steve wants to argue, but he knows he doesn't have a leg to stand on. He abandons all thoughts of leaving and wonders how long he can keep up a fake smile. "How long until it's over?" he asks.

"Depends," Fate tells him. "She didn't hire a band, so that's a good sign. For a small party, like this one, I'd say we might get out of here by one or two o'clock."

Steve tries to imagine a bigger shindig and fails. People are making out in the corner, half-empty beer bottles cover every table and shelf, and the music drowns out any attempt at intimate conversation. He's never been to a bigger party. Part of him hopes they don't exist. Everybody says Misery loves company, but Happiness is the real party girl.

Fate laughs and puts her hand on Steve's arm. She says to him, "It's only a few more hours."

Steve looks down at his arm. "Maybe I should go," he says. "This is awkward. I don't want to make trouble between you and your sister. Maybe I'd better go before ... Before." Steve looks into Fate's eyes and sees sad comprehension. "I'm sorry," he says.

Right then Happiness comes by. She's kind of breathy and a little flushed. Fate steps to the side to give her room.

"Are you having fun?" Happiness asks. A few people moving to the kitchen pass by behind her, forcing her to brush up against Steve, but he's a trooper about it.

"Yeah," Steve says.

Happiness shines her pearly teeth and says, "Come on, I'll introduce you to everybody. They're dying to meet you."

She tries to take his hand to pull him off somewhere, but Steve pulls himself out of her grasp. "That's okay, Happiness," he says. "I'm fine."

Happiness giggles and says, "Silly. How're you going to make friends if you don't meet anybody? I already told them all about you."

Steve shakes his head and says, "I'm sorry, Happiness, but I didn't come here to make friends with anybody."

Happiness stops to think for a second, and she starts thanking for the first time that she's lost the beat in this dance. "But that's why I threw this party," she says. "Now you don't have to be lonely all the time."

Steve almost gives in and goes with Happiness, but he catches a glimpse of Fate in the corner of his eye and says, "Thank you, but I think I'll stay here. Meeting people like this exhausts me."

Happiness smiles, the only thing she can think to do, and says, "Do you want a drink?"

"No," Steve says.

"Just have one drink," Happiness says. "It'll loosen you up. You'll be the life of the party, I promise."

"I don't want to have a drink, and I don't want to meet everybody on the planet. I want to be left alone, in silence, sober, like any sane human being. Why do you keep pushing? Can't you act more like your sister?" Steve yells.

Happiness stares at him. Fate turns white as a goth playing dress-up. The party stops, the music goes dead, and everybody looks. Nobody says a word, but all the partygoers remember they have a prior engagement. The house clears out in two minutes flat, and it's Happiness, Fate, and Steve standing in an empty house.

Happiness whips around and points at her sister. "You!" she says. "Don't jump to conclusions," Fate says.

Steve sits down. He knows he's a marshmallow due for a good toasting if he tries to leave. Happiness and Fate start talking fast and furious, the way only sisters can.

Happiness starts. "He's my boyfriend!" she says.

"I haven't heard him say that yet."

"Pick somebody else."

"Why don't you?"

"I really like him!"

"Do you like him," Fate says, "or do you want him to like you?"

Happiness stops and thinks for a second. She says, "I---" Then she turns to Steve and asks, "Who do you want?"

Steve says, "Neither of you." That makes him about as popular as shellfish on a hot day, but he keeps going and says, "The two of you are morons if you think bickering solves anything, or if sisters fighting is okay. I don't have time to sit here and watch this." He stands up.

Fate raises her hand to stop Steve from leaving. She turns to her sister and says, "If you're Happiness, then why can't you be happy for me?"

The two sisters stare at each other for a minute, give or take a million years. Happiness sucks in a deep breath. Her face turns red, then tears start running down her cheeks. She says, "Whatever. I didn't want him anyways," stomps to her room, slams the door behind her, and starts crying into her pillow. Steve and Fate can't hear her, but they're smart enough to read the fortune cookie.

The two sit down. "Should we see if she's okay?" Steve asks.

"Give her a few days. She'll bounce back," Fate says. "Happiness is tougher than she looks."

Steve nods. It makes sense to him. "What do we do now?" he asks.

"We?" Fate asks.

"We," he says. "You and me."

Fate doesn't say anything, but she sure likes the sound of that "we."

HAPPINESS MOVES OUT A FEW WEEKS LATER. SHE SAYS SHE wants go backpacking in Europe, and nobody tries too hard to keep her from going. That's where she meets me, and you know me. I heal all wounds.

Fate moves in with Steve. The two of them live happily ever after for a good eight years. But Fate's still the invisible hand, and even she can't get away with keeping a guy alive after his time. That inevitable day comes, and she breaks Steve's heart. It breaks her heart to do it, but don't you cry for them. They had a pretty good run. Neither one of 'em would have had it any other way.

True story.

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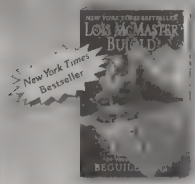

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Science Fiction Chronicle

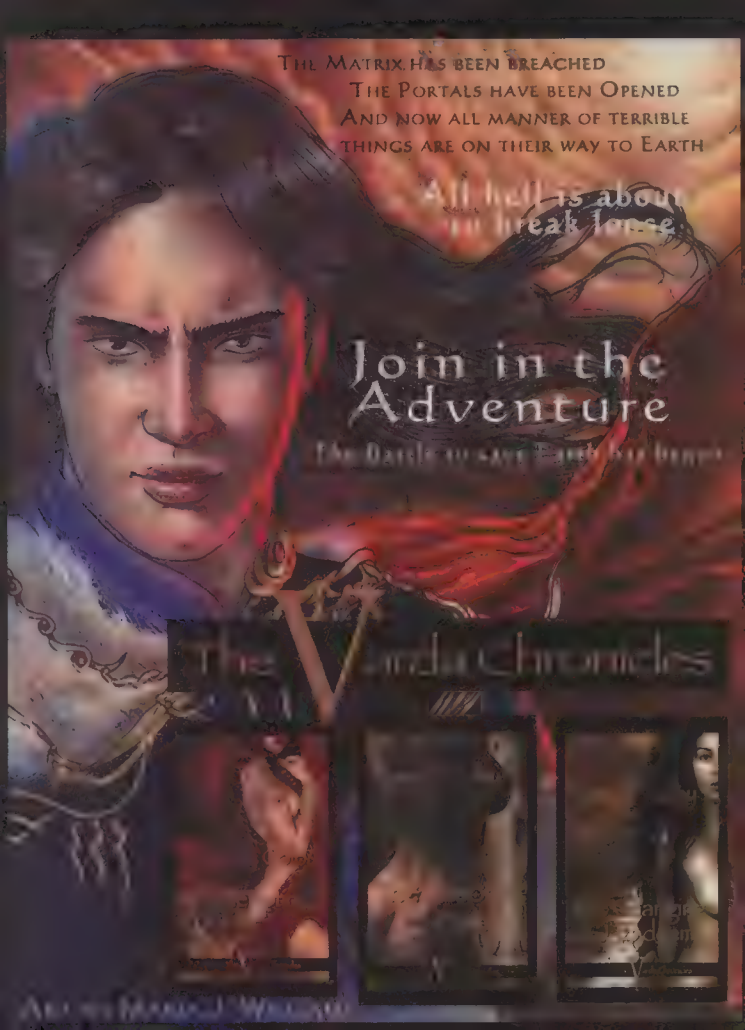
By Eric T. Baker

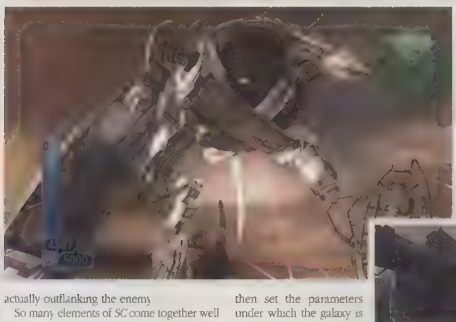
Supreme Commander and *Dark Avatar* challenge fans of RTS games.

This issue's column begins with two real-time strategy games. The first is ***Supreme Commander*** by Gas Powered Games and from THQ for the PC. Set in the far future where matter and energy are the only raw materials needed to create all the machines of war, the game pits three different factions against each other in huge robot-on-robot battles. The United Earth Federation is the galactic government that the other two factions are rebelling against. The Cybran Nation is composed of cyborgs who have won their freedom from the UEF's "loyalty programs." The Aeon Illuminate are human converts to an alien religion. They want to convert the rest of humanity, by force if necessary.

There are three tech levels in the game, and each faction builds the same sorts of units overall, with some small but telling variations that require the player to manage each faction a little differently. The main difference between the three factions, however, is the unique units that each can build. These are game-changing behemoths: the UEF's Submersible Aircraft Carrier, or the Cybran's Spiderbot, or the Aeon's Flying Fortress, just to name three, can make the decisive strike in any game — if the player can find the time and resources to build them.

Each faction has six single-player missions, although each of these missions can take up to three hours (save early, save often) and can be replayed at different difficulties. There is a skirmish mode where the player picks the forces and the map, and there is an online mode, where up to eight players can face off at once. And in *Supreme Commander*, there is actually room for eight players: the largest maps represent 81-by-81-kilometer battlefields. All that space, which gets used in all of the game's different modes, lets the player do things that are impossible in more concentrated RTS games; things like


The Matrix has been breached
The Portals have been Opened
And now all manner of terrible
things are on their way to Earth
All hell is about
to break loose
Join in the
Adventure
The Vandu Chronicles



actually outflanking the enemy

So many elements of *SC* come together well that it can certainly argue for a spot as the best RTS game to date, but it has a definite learning curve, plus some kinks and idiosyncrasies Ultimately, RTS fans will love this game, particularly those who loved *Total Annihilation* Those coming new to the RTS genre may come to love *SC*, but they will have to put in the time to learn to love it

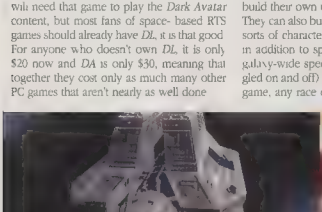
The second RTS is ***Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar*** from Stardock for the PC This is an expansion of the last year's *Galactic Civilizations II. Dread Lords*, and players will need that game to play the *Dark Avatar* content, but most fans of space- based RTS games should already have *DL*, it is that good For anyone who doesn't own *DL*, it is only $20 now and *DA* is only $30, meaning that together they cost only as much many other PC games that aren't nearly as well done

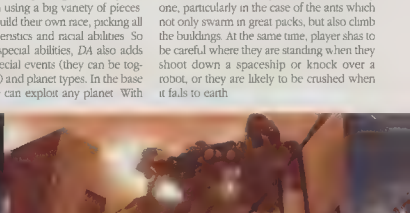
then set the parameters under which the galaxy is generated. On top of that, players can set the difficulty by adjusting, individually if they like, how well the computer races play Unlike so many RTS games, *GCII:DA* doesn't adjust the level of play by letting the AI races cheat

The customization is also available both in ship design and race design. Players can use the standard spaceship designs, or they can build their own using a big variety of pieces They can also build their own race, picking all sorts of characteristics and racial abilities So in addition to special abilities, *DA* also adds galaxy-wide special events (they can be toggled on and off) and planet types. In the base game, any race can exploit any planet With

to battling them on the most intimate of level ***Earth Defense Force 2017*** from D3 and for the Xbox 360 is an over-the- shoulder shooter that puts the player in the role of an infantry soldier battling with his comrades to save the Earth from an alien invasion The backstory is that Earth hears the alien ships coming while they are still years out and forms a world wide army to battle the aliens in case they turn out to be hostile Which they turn out to be

What this game will remind players of most is a Japanese monster movie. The aliens attack in waves first there are the giant ants, then the giant spaceships, then the giant robots, and so on. The player, armed with only two weapons for each level, battles these giant menaces in environments that are fully destructible In fact, if one of the character's weapons is a rocket launcher or a grenade, it is often easier to bring down a building on top of the attackers than it is to pick them off one by one, particularly in the case of the ants which not only swarm in great packs, but also climb the buildings. At the same time, player has to be careful where they are standing when they shoot down a spaceship or knock over a robot, or they are likely to be crushed when it falls to earth





What makes *GCII:DA* a good game is how customizable and flexible it is. *DA* adds a brand new campaign that both teaches players the games and is fun in and of itself But most players' time will be spent playing in games of their own choosing Players can set the size of the galaxy, the number of races competing, and

DA races now start with some planets they can exploit and others they have to learn how to use. In short, *GCII:DA* does what an expansion is supposed to do. It makes a great game even greater

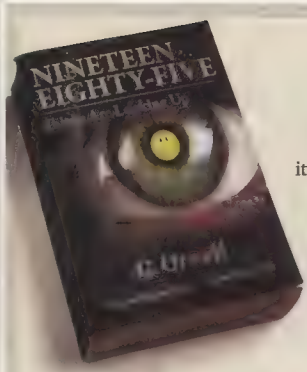
From battling aliens on the most galactic of levels, we shift

Smooth and slick *EDF* is not. The many powerups that drop when the enemies are killed, for example, are only 2-D. Buildings and spaceships blow up into huge, ungainly pieces Ants and Robots don't come apart at all, but topple or ricochet around until ending up still at some awkward angle to signify their death Nor are the enemies, or the many *EDF* allies that the player starts each scenario with,

very smart. It is a 360 game, but it feels like it was created a couple of generations ago. None of which says that *EDF* isn't fun, because it is definitely that. It is too repetitive to play for hours at time the way that *SC* and *GCIIDA* can be, but for an hour here and an hour there, it is a great game for blowing off steam, particularly if played two-player with someone in the same room.

In ***Armored Core 4***, from Sega for the Xbox 360 and the PS3, smooth and slick are fully on display. Once again, the players take the role of a mercenary pilot of a giant fighting robot: a "mech" by tradition, although they are known as Nexts in this game. It is a bleak corporate future and the character's job is to go from mission to mission, earning money, buying and customizing Nexts. There are 37 missions, plus unlockable "data packs" that are usually duels with very strong Nexts. Defeating them gives the player access to their schematic so the players can add these Nexts to their arsenal. In addition there is also online multiplayer combat so players can show off the work they've done in the single-player game.

Unlike Chrome Hounds, the mechs in *AC4* are not unfeeling, deliberate constructs. No Next in this game would think of rolling around on tank tracks, for instance. The mechs here are things of speed and grace. And speed. Both the look and feel of *AC4* is more like that of a first-person shooting game than that of other mech games. Particularly lending to this feel is the boosting ability the Nexts have. It allows them to travel at great speed on the ground more or less constantly. They can use up their boost energy by flying or hyper boost-



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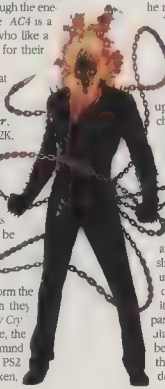
ing, but the energy refreshes so fast that there is little reason not to do these things.

One place where *AC4*'s emphasis on speed will bother some players is the timer on many of the missions. The player is expected to clear the objectives in a certain amount of time. If he doesn't, he earns penalty points that may end up with the mission costing him money instead of earning it. It is possible to build a sniper mech in *AC4*, but it is unlikely to clear missions in the time limit. High-boost mechs with powerful short-range weapons are more likely to cut through the enemies in the allotted time. *AC4* is a good game for players who like a focused, hell-bent pace for their challenges.

It seems pretty clear that the designers and programmers and artists who created ***Ghost Rider***, for the PS2 and PSP from 2K, intended it for an audience of people who hadn't already played the many action games for the PS2. Longtime PS2 owners who are fans of action games will be about 30 seconds into *GR*'s actual game play, after the lightly animated comic pages that form the opening cutscene, when they will think, "Oh. *Devil May Cry*." The camera, the story line, the fighting moves all will remind players of that classic PS2 franchise. By the same token, new players will find themselves enjoying the game play just as older players enjoyed *DMC* when they first played it.

The plot of the game follows, but also expands on, the plot of the movie Johnny Blaze, despite being cheated by the Devil and made the Ghost Rider, must nevertheless track down a bunch of demons who have escaped from Hell and end them. This means a lot of fighting and a lot of motorcycle riding. And a lot of killing, because it is the essences of dead demons that give the player the points he needs to unlock the game's extras.



The player starts the game with a certain number of special moves, and as the game progresses he unlocks more. Some of them are more useful than others. Particularly useful are the power-ups that improve Ghost Rider's chopper.

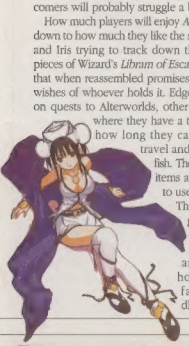
About a third of the game takes place with Johnny on his bike. These levels are basically rail shooters as the player doesn't so much drive the bike as hang on while the road he can't detour off leads him from ambush to obstacle to ambush and so on. There is jumping and sliding under obstacles, plus shooting and swinging chains at other demonic riders. Despite these limits, these are the most enjoyable parts of the game because of the simulation of high-speed riding, and because the riding levels don't have the battles against the special demons who can only be defeated

by chains of special moves. Overall, *Ghost Rider* is a game for those who are either new to this sort of game, or for those who simply can't get enough of the flame- headed hero.

Meanwhile, it seems pretty clear that the designers and programmers and artists who created ***Atelier Iris 3: Grand Phantasm***, for the PS2 from NIS America, intended their game for players who might not necessarily have played the first two installments of *AI*, but who are not new to 2-D roleplaying games, particularly those on the PS2. This is not to say that there isn't help to be had, or that the game doesn't slowly ramp its way up to its full complexity, because there is help and the game does slowly ramp. It is

the tone and the assumptions the game makes that put it on the "not for the newcomer" shelf. For example, the game starts *in medias res* with its two heroes, Edge and Iris, in the middle of a quest that quickly becomes a battle. Players who've been down the 2-D RPG road before will have no trouble saving the two heroes and getting the story started. Newcomers will probably struggle a bit.

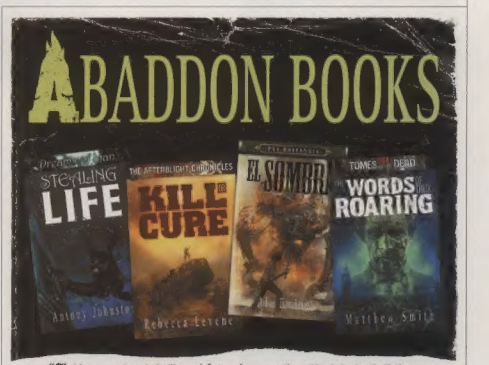
How much players will enjoy *AI3:GP* comes down to how much they like the story of Edge and Iris trying to track down the scattered pieces of Wizard's *Libram of Escalario*, a book that when reassembled promises to grant the wishes of whoever holds it. Edge and Iris go on quests to Alterworlds, other dimensions where they have a time limit on how long they can hunt and travel and battle. And fish. They build new items and weapons to use or to trade. They level up, gain, and lose allies, and travel around their home city on faerie-paddled boats. It



isn't exactly the same as other games of this type, but it isn't so different that players will keep with it if they don't like the characters and the story.

A lot of fantasy-set paper-and-dice roleplaying games make an effort to keep players out of the dungeons. After all, that is where role playing started, and there is a feeling of "been there and done that" about crawling through stone halls and clearing chambers of monsters and loot. Plus there is also a feeling that computer games now model dungeon crawling better than paper-and-dice games can. ***Dungeonscape: An Essential Guide to Dungeon Adventuring***, 158 hardbound full-color pages from Wizards of the Coast for *Dungeons & Dragons*, is an attempt to put the lie to both of these feelings. It is dedicated to the idea that done well, a dungeon is still the best place for adventure, and that the tabletop is still best place to experience the challenges of the classic dungeon crawl.

Overall the book succeeds at what it sets out to do, mostly by telling the Dungeon Master to keep enough "reality" to make things interesting, but to remember that the crawl is really a story and that it is the story that must be served. For instance, it is a good idea not to separate the beholders from the bug bears by only a single door, but at the same time it isn't worth the time and trouble to try to create an actual ecology inside the tombs. In addition to advice, the book also contains a new standard class, new prestige classes, new feats and skills, new spells and equipment, a chapter on dungeon design, another on dungeon encounters, and, of course, a long section on traps. ❧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Restless

Continued from page 79

"I don't know if I can really be careful," Tyler said after a moment. "But I'll be as careful as I can." The axe murmured again, more insistently, and Ty looked annoyed. "I will come back, if I can, Dad. And, ah ... I'll miss you."

"I love you, Ty," Richard said, because that's what you said to your children, because it was the truest thing in the world, even if they were too embarrassed sometimes to say it back.

"I know, Dad," Ty said, and stepped through the gash in the air. It shimmered, and closed up behind him, and Richard was left standing in his yard, alone, holding nothing.

LATER, RICHARD CALLED HIS SISTER-IN-law and told her Ty had run away. "He'll come back," she said. "Once he sees how hard it is out there, believe me, he'll come back. Or else he'll call me, and I'll tell him he'd damn well better go back. He's a good kid, Richard. He'll do the right thing."

But Ty never returned.

Six years later, Richard came home from a movie—he spent a lot of time going to movies—and found a long wooden box resting on the doorstep. Richard took the box inside and opened it up, unable to decide if he should be hopeful, excited, or afraid. The box was full of straw, with an envelope inside. Richard sat on the couch, opened the envelope, and took a photograph out. The photo was from an old-fashioned instant camera, and Richard tried to remember the last time he'd seen one of those, in these days of digital photography.

The photograph was of Ty, older, with a blond beard, standing in a forest beside a woman—her hair was a shocking mane of red, her eyes an impossible gold—holding a young boy in her arms. The child had blond hair, and golden eyes, and he scowled as only a small child can. Tears came to Richard's eyes.

The note inside the envelope, in a strange brownish ink, read, "I understand now, Dad. I care about my son more than I've ever cared about anything in the world, more than our axe, more than winning the war, more than my life. I met a smith here. I had him make something for you."

Richard put the letter down. He brushed the straw aside, and revealed a short sword nestled in the box, its blade a silvery gleam, its hilt capped with an amber stone. Richard took up the sword. "Hello," he said.

Let's go, the sword whispered. *Go, go, go.*

Richard took the sword and cut the air. Through the gash, he saw the hematite fortress in ruins, and all the trees in full flower. Pushing fifty, the ache in his back worse than ever, and happier than he'd been in a dozen years, Richard stepped through the air to meet his grandson. ❧

Charles Vess

Continued from page 85

the eye upward, inviting us to ascend: towering mountains; along the roofs of teetering buildings; toward the underside of a flying ship; rising with the twisting trunks of trees; seeking the glow of moon-like lanterns above the faerie market; accompanying the image of Yvaine rising iconically and cosmically above the land; a plaintive song sung to celestial sisters. These new illustrations draw us up and out of our world, into the world where the stars hold sway. All of them, that is, but one.

A Descent Into Hell

It is said, and said truly, that all things that go up must come down. So it is that in a possible future continuation of the story, when the mad deadlines of Neil and Charles have receded, the next book would begin with this image: Tristan descending in a hot air balloon into Hell. Someone else accompanies him in the carriage. The identity is a mystery. Neil asked Charles to show him who that person might be. An Angel of Death, who could be either Tristan's companion or his nemesis? It's a tantalizing image, inviting us to imagine a scenario surrounding this mythic descent: An Orphic quest? A Hadean holiday? Someone hungry for pomegranates (always in season in Hell)? A brief visit to see some member of the extended family? Lucifer was himself a fallen star.

What or who awaits our hero in the land below? Only time and patience will tell.

For most artists, depicting Wall and its environs—with the complexities of interwoven worlds (ours and Faerie), the combination of Victorian background with the fantastical—would be a daunting business. But this is the stuff upon which Charles Vess thrives. Rich colors and swirling shadows, scenes framed with shading boughs of primeval trees, weave familiar and unfamiliar worlds seamlessly together. The beauty and grace of this tapestry world, its drama, invites us over the wall and into a land where the common and the magical walk as one. The success of any artist may be judged by whether or not the images born of his imagination present us with places more attractive than the ones in which we live. Who can look at Charles's Faerie Market and not want to sample the wares? Who can watch a galleon flying among the clouds and not want to set sail? Who can hear the song of the stars and not desire to look up? ❧

The new hardcover edition of Stardust *with over 50 pages of supplemental material, including all these new paintings and much more, was published by DC Comics/Vertigo in May of this year. To see more of Charles's work go to www.greenmanpress. com. For information on a major exhibition of many of the paintings from* Stardust *visit www.wkrac.org.*

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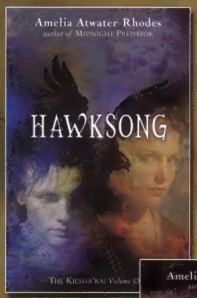

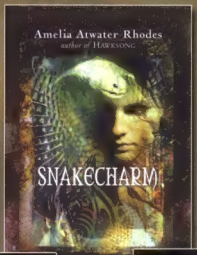

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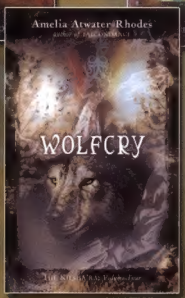

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